SPEARHEAD

# COMMANDOS

## Churchill's 'Hand of Steel'

SIMON DUNSTAN

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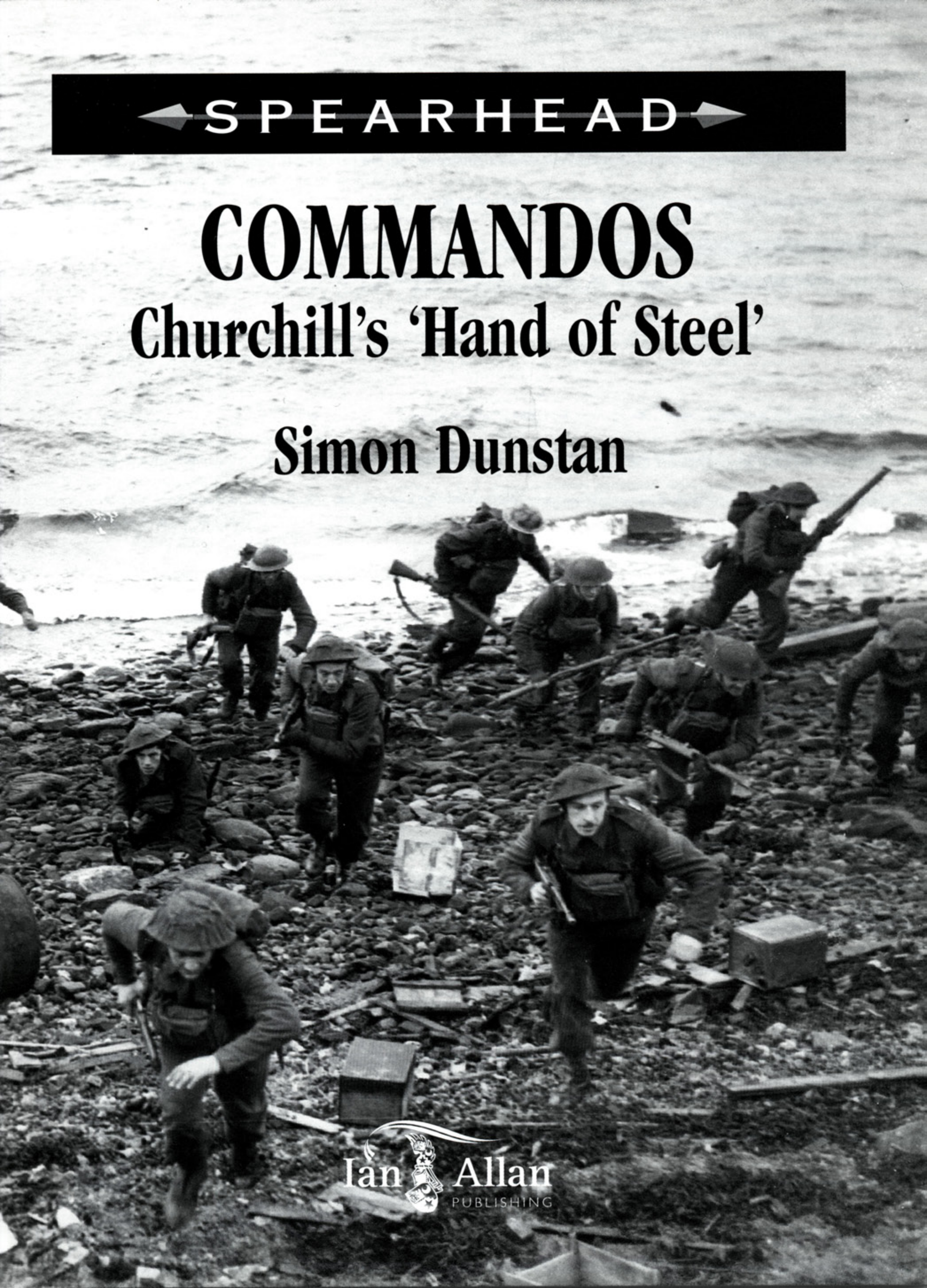

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# COMMANDOS

## Churchill's 'Hand of Steel'

Simon Dunstan

Ian Allan
PUBLISHING

**Previous Page:** Landing craft were the essential tool for the Commandos, particularly smaller types such as this LCA or Landing Craft Assault. With a crew of one officer and three ratings, the LCA was 35 feet long and 9 feet in beam with a draught of 3 feet. It was capable of carrying a maximum of 35 Commandos. *CEC*

**Below:** The 'Steel Hand from the Sea' and the sight that filled a German sentry with terror. The Commando raiders tied down hundreds of thousands of German troops along the coastline of occupied Europe. *IWM – H19284*

## Dedication

To Bill Carman whose longevity of 94 years he ascribes to his declining Peter Young's invitation to join the Commandos in 1941.

## Acknowledgements

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The re-enactment photography is by the author.

The following abbreviations are used in the photo credits: IWM – Imperial War Museum; CEC – Chris Ellis Collection; WFC – Will Fowler Collection; CMC – Charles Messenger Collection.

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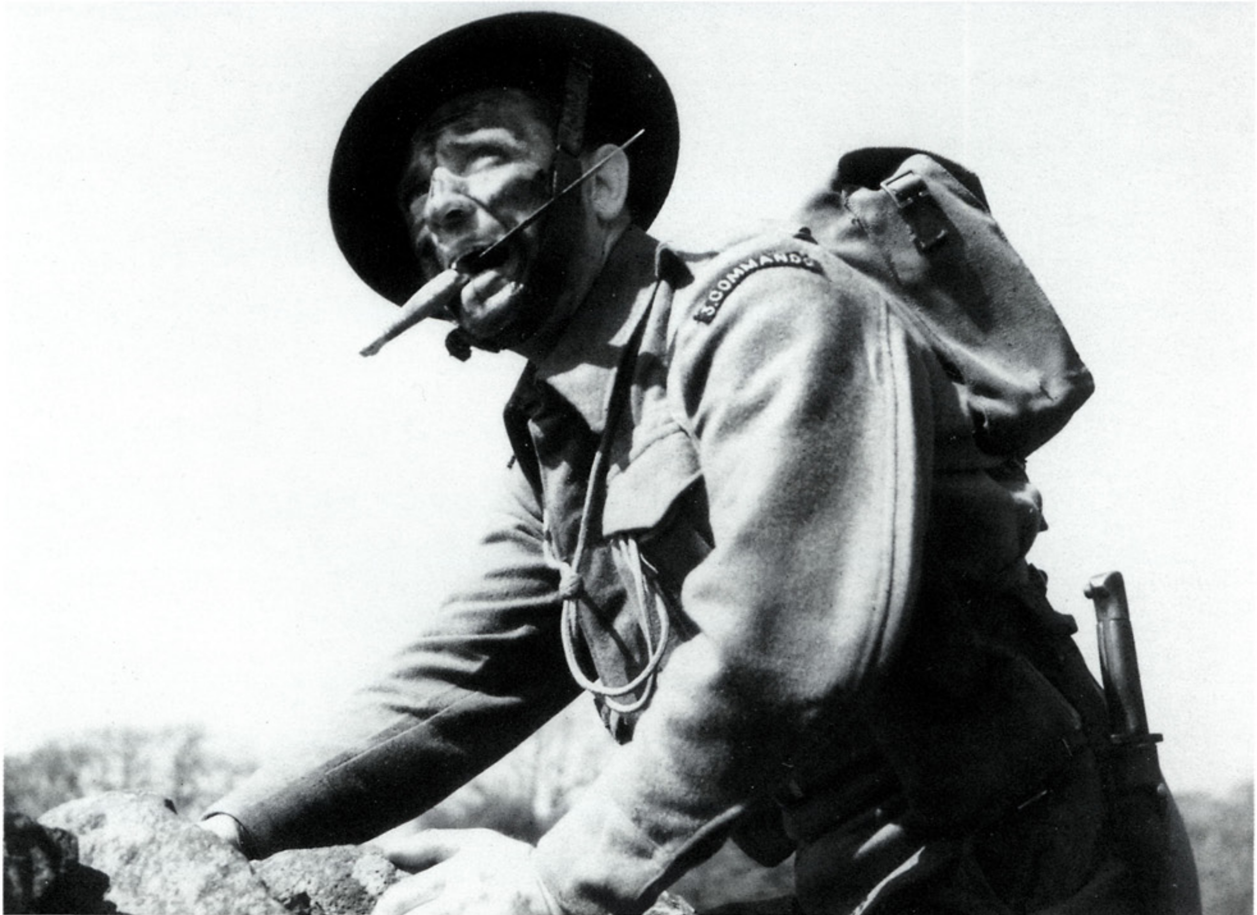

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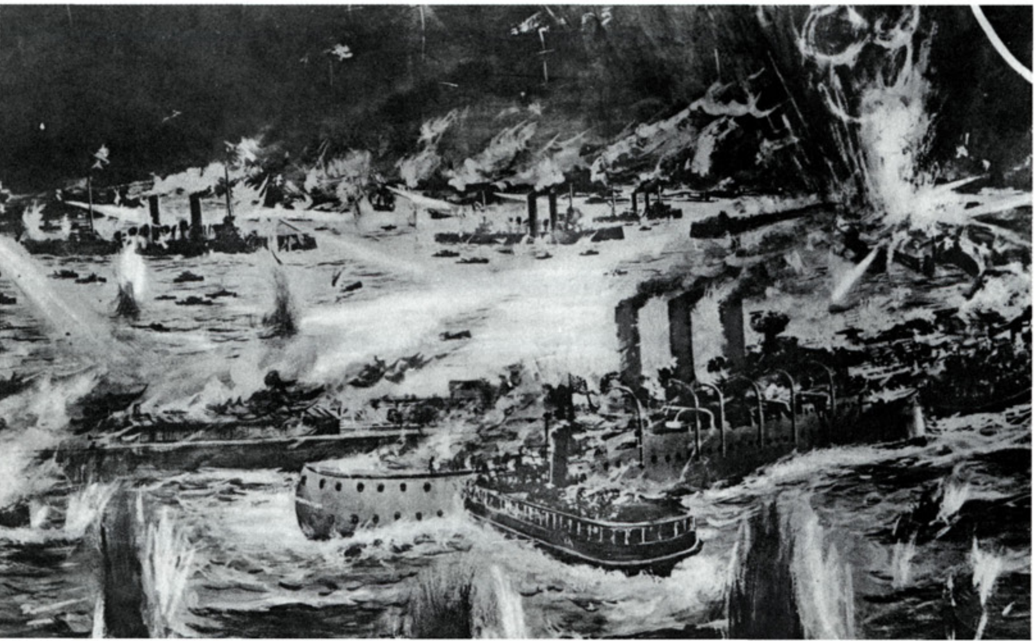
# ORIGINS & HISTORY

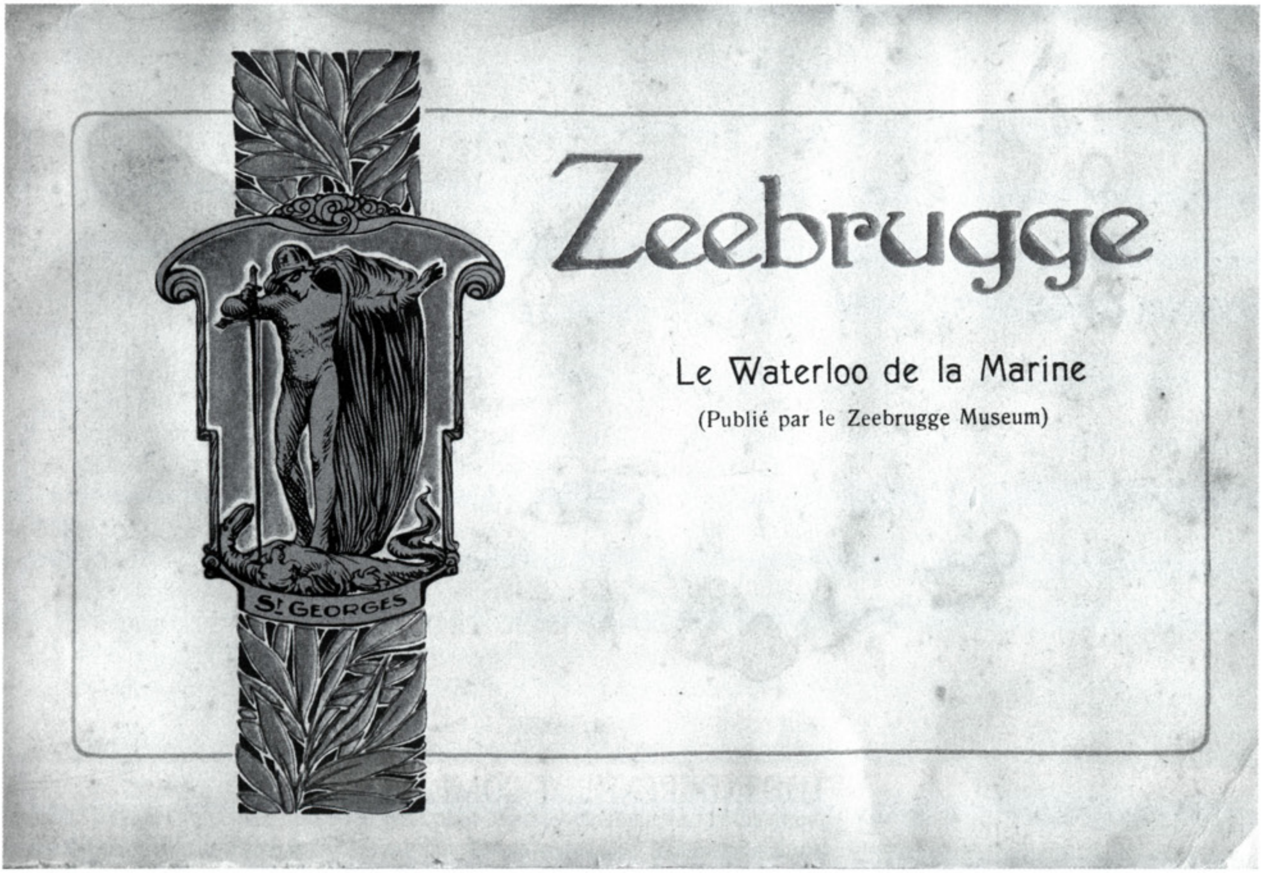
As an island nation, Great Britain has relied primarily on the Royal Navy for the defence of the realm. The British have traditionally been wary of a standing army, fearing such an institution as a means of repression by autocratic monarchs. With the reformation of the monarchy in 1660, control of the army was vested in Parliament. Forces to defend Crown and country were raised by parliamentary decree, often to fight specific campaigns, usually on the Continent against the expanding power of despotic France. On 28 October 1664, during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, a new formation was specifically raised for service as 'Land Souldjers' with the 'Navy Royall and Admiralty' under the designation of 'The Duke of York and Albany's Maritime Regiment of Foot', better known as the 'Admiral's Regiment'. Thus were born the forebears of the Royal Marines and a 300-year tradition of amphibious warfare that continues to today.

These 'Sea-Soldiers' were first referred to as Marines in 1672 after the Battle of Sole Bay. Thereafter, the Marines fought in virtually every sea battle and won immortal fame in the capture of Gibraltar in 1704 and its subsequent defence. Their prowess in amphibious warfare grew throughout the 18th century, being well displayed during the Seven Years War including in a diversionary raid during Wolfe's capture of Quebec. This expertise continued to be demonstrated through the Napoleonic Wars, when the Royal Marines numbered some 30,000 men, and into the 19th century, epitomised by the Corps' motto of *Per Mare, Per Terram* – 'By Sea, By Land'. In 1855, to take account of their expanding role on land and sea, the Royal Marines were divided into the Royal Marine Artillery or 'Blue Marines' and the Royal Marine Light Infantry or 'Red Marines'. Essentially, the Blue Marines became gunners within the Royal Navy while the Red Marines conducted amphibious assaults and raids. During the Great War, the latter were formed into a Royal Navy Brigade and fought with distinction on the Western Front and during the disastrous landings at Gallipoli in 1915.

**Below:** The Mersey River ferry boats *Daffodil* and *Iris* push the modified cruiser HMS *Vindictive* alongside the mole to allow the Royal Marines of No. 4 Battalion to land and attack the extensive German defensive positions of Zeebrugge on St George's Day 1918.



The appalling carnage of the Western Front consumed much of the resources of the Corps, both as Marine infantry within the Royal Naval Division and as gunners of the Royal Marine Artillery, while their comrades at sea served in the gun turrets of the Royal



Zeebrugge

Le Waterloo de la Marine

(Publié par le Zeebrugge Museum)

**Above:** The Zeebrugge raid of 23 April 1918 was hailed as a great success and did much to restore civilian morale during the difficult days of early 1918 when the Germans mounted a massive offensive against the British on the Western Front. For many years, there was a magnificent memorial and museum in Zeebrugge commemorating the raid that the Belgians called the 'Waterloo of the Sea' but the Germans destroyed them in World War II.

Navy's warships. Yet the concept of amphibious warfare was not forgotten and as the war dragged on into its fifth year, the Royal Navy devised an ambitious plan to counter the growing menace of the German U-boats that were gradually strangling the British maritime supply lines in the North Atlantic. With merchant ships being lost in record numbers, Britain was close to starvation. Under the inspired leadership of Vice-Admiral Roger Keyes, the 4th Battalion Royal Marines landed on the heavily defended mole of Zeebrugge harbour on St George's Day, 23 April, 1918. Suffering ghastly casualties as they suppressed the German defences, the Royal Marines' assault allowed three blockships to be sunk across the mouth of the canal which gave the German U-boats access to the North Sea. The Zeebrugge raid was hailed as a major success and did much to raise morale among a dispirited population at home. Furthermore, it was the prototype for the great Commando raids of World War II.

In the austerity of post-war Britain, the Treasury attempted to abolish the Royal Marines in 1922. From a wartime high of 55,000, the Corps was reduced to just 9,500 men. Its prime roles remained as manning gun turret crews at sea and preparing for amphibious operations against an enemy coastline, but little development of landing craft was undertaken during the 1920s or 1930s. Indeed, the First Sea Lord declared in 1938 that he did not expect that combined amphibious operations would be mounted in the next war. At the outbreak of war in September 1939 the Royal Marines numbered just 13,472 men and reserves. The Corps quickly expanded, with new sections such as the Royal Marine Fortress Unit and the Royal Marine Siege Regiment being formed, but the principal role of amphibious warfare had been woefully neglected, a failure that was to be cruelly exposed in the Norwegian campaign of April 1940.

# READY FOR WAR

**Above:** The Zeebrugge raid was the inspiration for the Commando attacks of World War 2 and it was fitting that the first chief of Combined Operations in 1940 was Admiral Keyes who had been the commander of the Zeebrugge raid in 1918.

Although rearmament had begun as early as 1936, the British Army was fearfully ill equipped to face the might of Nazi Germany and so it proved when the Phoney War was shattered with the German invasions of Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940. This prompted the War Office to raise a new form of unit known as Independent Companies to conduct unconventional warfare against an enemy coastline. As their name suggested, they were to operate independently from the ships on which they served or in concert should the need arise. The first ten independent companies comprising some 3,000 volunteers were formed on 20 April 1940, drawn principally from the divisions of the Territorial Army.

## THE INDEPENDENT COMPANIES

No. 1 Independent Company was formed from the 52nd (Lowland) Division; No. 2 was raised in Northern Ireland from the 53rd (Welsh) Division; No. 3 at Ponteland from the 54th (East Anglian) Division; No. 4 at Sizewell in Suffolk from the 55th (West Lancashire) Division; No. 5 at Lydd from the 56th (London) Division; No. 6 at Carnoustie from the 9th (Scottish) Division; No. 7 at Hawick from the 15th (Scottish) Division; No. 8 at Mundford in Norfolk from the 18th (Eastern) Division; No. 9 at Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire from the 36th (Welsh) Division and No. 10 from the 66th (Lancashire and Border) Division. An 11th Independent Company was later formed with 115 men drawn from Nos. 6 and 8 Independent Companies.

With little time for formal training, the first five companies were despatched to Norway as 'Scissors Force' under the command of Colonel Colin Gubbins with the task of denying the ports of Bodö, Mo and Mosjöen to the Germans. After some indecisive fighting, all five Independent Companies returned to Britain by 10 June. Meanwhile, the other five Independent Companies were undergoing training in the Glasgow area or guarding coastal towns when Hitler unleashed his long awaited Blitzkrieg in the West with the invasion of the Low Countries and France on 10 May.

Three days earlier, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, the commander of the Zeebrugge raid in 1918 and a Tory Member of Parliament, entered the Houses of Parliament in full naval uniform and gave a devastating critique of the Norwegian campaign. The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, was forced to resign while MPs sang *Rule Britannia* and others chanted 'Go! Go!' Winston Churchill replaced Chamberlain. A new sense of purpose soon permeated the government and clear direction was now given to the military, despite the reverses being suffered in the battle for France. By the end of May, the British Expeditionary Force had been driven back to the French port of Dunkirk. Between 27 May and 4 June, the Royal Navy retrieved 338,226 officers and men,

including 139,097 Frenchmen, from the evacuation beaches where the last of the army's heavy weapons and equipment lay abandoned. Britain now stood alone against Nazi Germany whose conquests stretched from Northern Norway to the Pyrenees and eastwards to the borders of the Soviet Union. The awful prospect of invasion loomed large.

**Above:** The use of live ammunition during field training exercises was standard for the Commandos, with many exercises conducted at night. *IWM – H19376*

On that momentous day of 4 June, Winston Churchill addressed the House of Commons on the 'Miracle of Dunkirk' but he went on to say that wars were not won by evacuations. To this end, he had written to the Chiefs of Staff on the day before to demand:

> 'If it is so easy for the German to invade us... why should it be impossible for us to do anything of the same kind to him... The completely defensive habit of mind, which has ruined the French, must not be allowed to ruin all our initiatives. It is of the highest consequence to keep the largest numbers of German forces all along the coasts of the countries he has conquered, and we should immediately set to work to organise raiding forces on these coasts where the populations are friendly. Such forces might be composed by self-contained, thoroughly equipped units of say 1,000 up to not less than 10,000 when combined.'

Subsequently, the Prime Minister elaborated:

> 'Enterprises must be prepared with specially trained troops of the hunter class, who can develop a reign of terror first of all on the "butcher and bolt" policy. I look to the Chiefs of Staff to propose me measures for a vigorous enterprising and ceaseless offensive against the whole German occupied coastline, leaving a trail of German corpses behind.'

The Chiefs of Staff considered the Prime Minister's ideas at a meeting on 6 June and they drew up plans for the organisation of 'striking companies' of approximately 5,000 men as well as a covert force for intelligence gathering and sabotage across occupied Europe.

The latter emerged as the Special Operations Executive (SOE) on 22 July 1940 following Churchill's demand that it 'co-ordinate all action by way of subversion and sabotage against the enemy overseas.' In one of his many trenchant phrases, Churchill gave the new unit, which he dubbed the 'Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare', a simple directive: 'Set Europe ablaze'.The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, passed the proposal for the 'striking companies' to his Military Assistant, Lt-Col Dudley Clarke, Royal Artillery. Of South African birth, Clarke cast his mind back to his childhood and the stirring tales of the Boer Kommandos that had paralysed thousands of British Empire troops in the final months of the South African War of 1899–1902. As lightly armed riflemen riding fast, tough ponies, the Kommandos had taught the British Army a profound lesson in the value and economy of irregular warfare that it would never forget. Having also fought during the Arab Rebellion in Palestine during the 1930s, Clarke proposed a similar band of guerrillas to conduct 'tip-and-run raids of not more than 48 hours from bases in England against the Continent of Europe.' He further proposed that the 'striking companies' be called Commandos, a name that Churchill fully appreciated as he himself had been in South Africa while covering the war as a newspaper reporter and had been captured by the Boers before escaping.

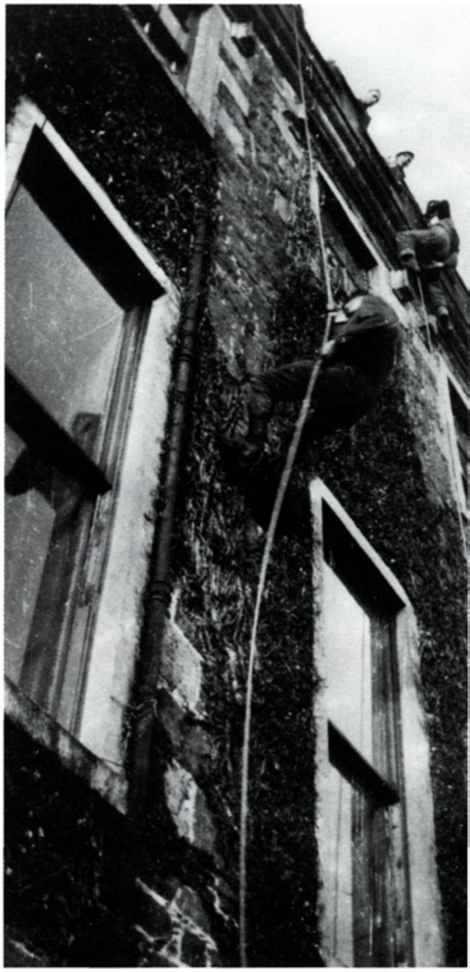
Churchill immediately gave permission for the formation of the Commandos with the urgent proviso: 'Your Commando scheme is approved... get going at once. Try to get a raid across the Channel mounted at the earliest possible moment.' On the afternoon of 6 June 1940, four years to the day before the invasion of German-occupied Europe, Section MO 9 of the War Office was created under Maj-Gen R. Dewing, Director of

**Below:** At the outset, the Commandos had little equipment, as indicated by this wooden mock up of an assault landing craft. *IWM – OPS15*

Military Operations and Plans. He immediately issued a memorandum summarising the concept of the Commandos:

> 'The object of forming a Commando is to collect together a number of individuals trained to fight independently as an irregular and not as a formed military unit. For this reason a Commando will have no unit equipment and need not necessarily have a fixed establishment... The procedure proposed for raising and maintaining Commandos is as follows. One or two officers in each Command will be selected as Commando Leaders. They will each be instructed to select from their own Commands a number of Troop Leaders to serve under them. The Troop Leaders will in turn select the officers and men to form their own Troop. While no strengths have yet been decided upon I have in mind Commandos of strength like 10 troops of roughly 50 men each. Each troop will have a commander and one or possibly two other officers... The Commando organisation is really intended to provide no more than a pool of specialised soldiers from which irregular units of any size and type can be very quickly created to undertake any particular task.'

And quickly created they were. On 12 June, Lt-Gen Sir Alan Bourne, Adjutant-General of the Corps of Royal Marines, was appointed as Commander Offensive Operations in charge of raids against Belgium, France, Holland and Norway. Plans were immediately drawn up for the first Commando raid, despite the almost total lack of suitable boats or weapons. Twelve days later, motor launches landed the 115 men of No. 11 Independent Company, together with Colonel Dudley Clarke as an observer, on the coast of France near the port of Boulogne. With them were half of all the Tommy guns in the British Army's inventory, a total of just 40 – reputedly a gift from the mayor of New York of weapons confiscated from the city's gangsters. Unfamiliar with the weapon, an officer tried to engage a patrol of German cyclists in the Commando's first encounter with the enemy but the magazine of the Tommy gun promptly fell off and in the exchange of fire that followed Colonel Clarke was shot through the ear. Ironically, the man who conceived the Commandos was the first to be wounded in action with the enemy. With dawn approaching, the Commandos re-embarked 'grimy, dishevelled and triumphant' and returned to Dover where 'they were cheered by every ship in the harbour'. An official communiqué stated:



**Above:** Commandos practise abseiling down the front of the Achnacarry Commando Basic Training Centre in Scotland. *CMC*

> 'In co-operation with the RAF, naval and military raiders carried out a reconnaissance of the enemy coast. Landings were effected, contact made with German troops and casualties inflicted before our troops withdrew without loss.'

*The Times* thundered: 'BRITISH RAIDERS LAND ON ENEMY COAST! SUCCESSFUL RECONNAISSANCE'. Despite the banner headlines, Operation Collar had not achieved a great deal and a second raid conducted on 14 July fared little better. Codenamed Operation Ambassador, 139 men of No. 11 Independent Company and the newly formed No. 3 Commando were intended to destroy German aircraft on an airfield situated on the island of Guernsey. Churchill was incensed that the Germans had captured the Channel Islands – the only part of the British Isles to be occupied during the war – and he personally ordered the raid, demanding: 'Plans should be studied to land secretly by night on the Islands and kill or capture the invaders. This is exactly one of the exploits for which the Commandos would be suited.' Due to navigational problems and poor weather, only 40 men of No. 3 Commando under the command of Major John Durnford-Slater were able to land and little damage was inflicted on the enemy. With 'no trail of corpses' to be had, Churchill was not best pleased: 'It would be most unwise to disturb the coasts of these countries by the kind of silly fiascos which were perpetrated at Boulogne and Guernsey – the idea of working up all these coasts against us by pin-prick raids and fulsome communiqués is one to be strictly avoided.' The Churchillian pen promptly issued a new string of directives that emerged just three days later.

On 17 July the redoubtable Admiral Roger Keyes was appointed as head of Combined Operations to oversee all raiding operations in conjunction with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force; this was the first tri-service organisation to be created. This was subsequently reflected in its formation badge of a naval anchor, RAF eagle and a Tommy gun – the weapon that became the hallmark of the Commandos. Keyes' task was formidable. With the threat of invasion growing by the day, the War Office was disinclined to divert scarce resources and manpower to the fledgling organisation. Only the day before, Hitler had promulgated his 'Directive 16' for the conquest of Britain under the codename of Operation Sealion. Nevertheless, following a circular despatched on 20 June to each of the Home Commands requesting 'volunteers for special service of an undefined hazardous nature', many soldiers across the length and breadth of the country had come forward as only too willing to join such an elite fighting unit in the nation's hour of need.

The initial plan was to raise eleven Commando units, each with ten troops of 50 men. No. 1 Commando was to be created from personnel of the Independent Companies but for the time being they remained in being as a counter-invasion force. No. 2 Commando was intended as a dedicated parachute unit but at this stage there were neither the equipment nor aircraft for such a scheme. No. 3 and No. 4 Commandos were to come from Southern Command; No. 5 and No. 6 Commandos from Western Command; No. 7 and No. 8 Commandos from Eastern Command but No. 8 Commando was actually raised from London District and the Household Division; No. 9 and No. 11 Commando from Scottish Command and No. 10 Commando from Northern Command. In the chaotic summer months of 1940 as the Royal Air Force struggled with the marauding Luftwaffe in the skies above Britain, intentions could not always be realised and War Office opposition remained

## SPECIAL SERVICE BRIGADE

Formed 11 November 1940 – superseded March 1941
Commander: Brigadier J.C. Haydon

*1st Special Service Battalion, based in Devon*
A Special Service Company, formed from Nos. 1, 2, 3 & 4 Independent Companies
B Special Service Company, formed from Nos. 5, 8 & 9 Independent Companies
(later to become Nos. 1 & 2 Commandos)

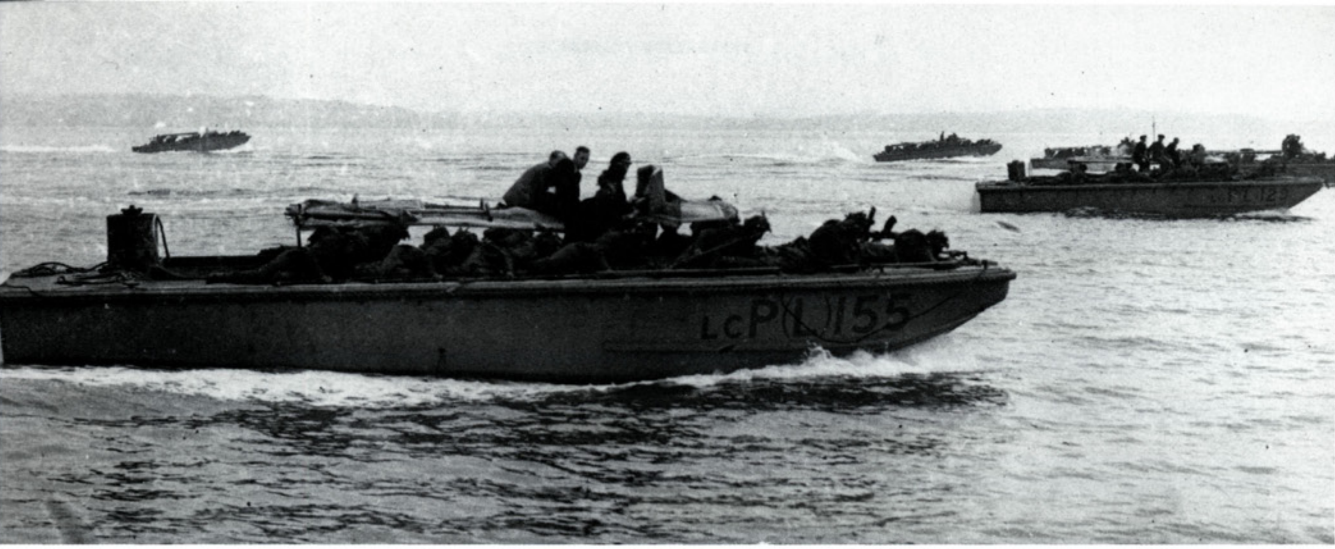
*2nd Special Service Battalion, based in Scotland*
A Special Service Company, formed from Nos. 6 & 7 Independent Companies and No. 9 Commando
B Special Service Company, formed from No. 11 Commando
(later to become Nos. 9 & 11 Commandos)

*3rd Special Service Battalion, based in Scotland*
A Special Service Company, formed from No. 4 Commando
B Special Service Company, formed from No. 7 Commando
(later Nos. 4 & 7 Commandos)

*4th Special Service Battalion, based in Scotland*
A Special Service Company, formed from No. 3 Commando
B Special Service Company formed from No. 8 Commando
(later Nos. 3 & 8 Commandos)

*5th Special Service Battalion, based in Scotland*
A Special Service Company, formed from No. 5 Commando
B Special Service Company, formed from No. 6 Commando
(later Nos. 5 & 6 Commandos)

No. 2 Commando became 11 Special Air Service Battalion, subsequently the 1st Parachute Battalion and then the Parachute Regiment.
No. 10 Commando disbanded December 1940, later to be resurrected as No. 10 Inter-Allied Commando.
No. 12 Commando remained outside the Special Service Brigade for special duties in Ireland.



**Above:** Commandos line the deck of their Landing Craft Personnel (Light), with a Bren gun team on the bows, during a Combined Operations exercise. The LCP(L) was formerly known as the 'R-Boat' and it was this type of craft that carried No. 3 Commando during the Dieppe raid in August 1942. *CEC*

obdurate. In Northern Command, there were insufficient volunteers for No. 10 Commando to be formed and in August 1940 an under-strength No. 12 Commando was raised from units stationed in Northern Ireland. On 25 August, Churchill wrote:

> 'I hear that the whole position of the Commandos is being questioned. They have been told "no more recruiting" and their future is in the melting pot... There will certainly be many opportunities for minor operations, all of which will depend on surprise landings of lightly equipped, nimble forces accustomed to work like packs of hounds instead of being moved about in the ponderous manner which is appropriate to the regular formations... For every reason therefore we must develop the storm troop or Commando idea. I have asked for 5,000 parachutists, and we must also have 10,000 of these small "bands of brothers" who will be capable of lightning action.'

In the late summer of 1940 the military situation facing Britain was critical. With Commando units dotted around the country undergoing training, the War Office transferred the operational control of all such troops from Combined Operations Command to Home Forces. By the autumn, with the threat of invasion receding, they reverted to Combined Operations but the War Office imposed yet another reorganisation that dispensed with the title of Commandos as it was deemed inappropriate. Henceforth they were to be referred to as 'Special Service Troops'. If the term Commando was considered inappropriate, it begs the question how the War Office believed that a formation with the same initials as Hitler's sinister SS was more seemly. On Remembrance Day 1940, the Special Service Brigade was formed with five Special Service battalions each with two Special Service companies.

The change of designation to Special Service was widely unpopular with the troops and some officers refused to recognise the new title at all. Maj John Durnford-Slater of No. 3 Commando directed his adjutant, Capt Charlie Head: 'Never let the term "Special Service Battalion" appear on our Orders.' Nevertheless, the priority was training and the procurement of modern weapons. At the outset, each Commando was responsible for the training of its troops, although many did attend the Irregular Warfare School in Scotland which was established in May 1940. Unit training therefore inevitably reflected the attitudes and vagaries of the individual commanding officers and their subordinates which led to marked differences in the operating procedures of the various units – see the box 'The Commando Catechism' (overleaf) for one version. In February 1942, however, the Commando Depot, later the Commando Basic Training Centre, was established at Achnacarry Castle, near Fort William, in the Highlands of Scotland to implement standard methods of training. The depot was commanded by the formidable Lt-Col. Charles Vaughan. Formerly a drill sergeant in the Coldstream Guards, Vaughan then joined the Buffs before serving as 2i/c of No. 4 Commando. His requirements were strict and his demands legendary. Every officer, NCO and man alike went through the same course. The first intake arrived at Achnacarry on 17 March 1942. Donald Gilchrist, a lieutenant with No. 4 Commando at Dieppe, recalled Vaughan with admiration and respect:

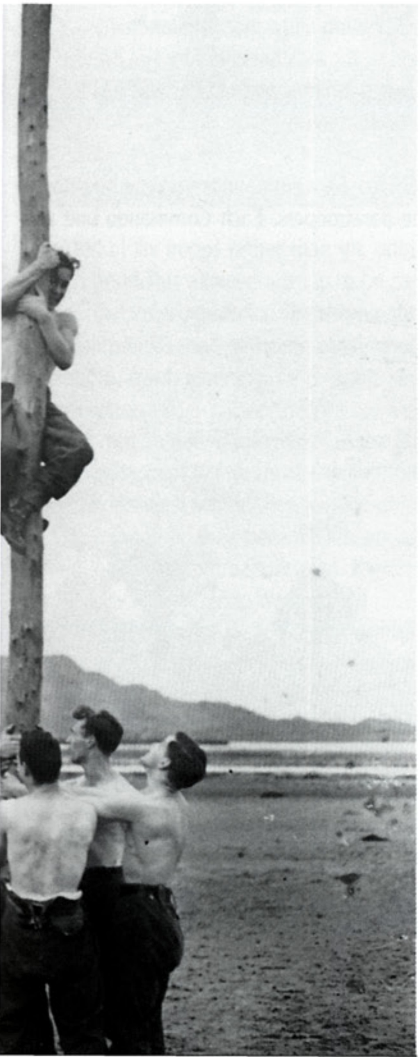
> 'He came through the First World War… and remembered that many men had been sent to the Western Front without sufficient training. Many had no idea of the conditions of war, especially in the winter months… Training was never stopped because of the weather or on Sunday. He said, "Hitler didn't stop the war because it was Sunday".'

Besides the basic skills of an infantryman, a fully fledged Commando was expected to have a high level of self-motivation and self-reliance to enable him to undertake a range of tasks within his unit, such as the ability to map read and use a compass should the officer or NCO be incapacitated. A high proficiency in weapons' handling was essential, using anything from the Lee-Enfield to the 3-inch mortar and from the Tommy gun to the Boys anti-tank rifle. In addition, a Commando had to have particular skills in seamanship to operate in all sorts of

**Below:** Commando training was rigorous and arduous with much time devoted to physical fitness, as shown by these recruits on a windswept Scottish beach. Failure to meet the high standards of the Commandos led to the shame of being RTU'd or Returned To Unit. *IWM – OPS27*

boats and landing craft. The ability to swim was desirable, no more so than when disembarking from a landing craft in full equipment order, but it was not mandatory.

Accordingly, the physical training for an aspiring Commando was strenuous in the extreme and those that could not make the grade were unceremoniously 'RTU'd' or 'Returned To Unit' – the ultimate ignominy. The work started from the first moment a recruit arrived at Spean Bridge railway station, when he was immediately required to march the ten miles to Achnacarry Castle with all his kit. On arrival, he was shown the 'graves' of other recruits who had failed. Each headstone was inscribed with a dire warning: 'This man did not clean his rifle'; 'This man stood on the skyline'; 'This man looked over cover and not around it'. A typical day began at 0630 hours with a training run and PT before breakfast at



## THE COMMANDO CATECHISM

*by Lt-Col Charles Newman, CO No. 2 Commando, 1940*

1. The object of Special Service is to have available a fully trained body of first class soldiers, ready for active offensive operations against an enemy in any part of the world.
2. Irregular warfare demands the highest standards of initiative, mental alertness and physical fitness, together with the maximum skill at arms. No Commando can feel confident of success unless all ranks are capable of thinking for themselves; of thinking quickly and of acting independently, and with sound tactical sense, when faced by circumstances which may be entirely different to those which were anticipated.
3. Mentally. The offensive spirit must be the outlook of all ranks of a Commando at all times.
4. Physically. The highest state of physical fitness must at all times be maintained. All ranks are trained to cover at great speed any type of ground for distances of five to seven miles in fighting order.
5. Cliff and mountain climbing and really difficult slopes climbed quickly form a part of Commando training.
6. A high degree of skill in all branches of unarmed combat will be attained.
7. Seamanship and Boatwork. All ranks must be skilled in all forms of boatwork and landing craft whether by day or by night, as a result of which training the sea comes to be regarded as a natural working ground for a Commando.
8. Night sense and night confidence are essential. All ranks will be highly trained in the use of the compass.
9. Map reading and route memorising form an important part of Commando training.
10. All ranks of a Commando will be trained in semaphore, Morse and the use of W/T.
11. All ranks will have elementary knowledge of demolitions and sabotage. All ranks will be confident in the handling of all types of high explosive, Bangalore torpedoes, and be able to set up all types of booby traps.
12. A high standard of training will be maintained in all forms of street fighting, occupation of towns, putting towns into a state of defence and the overcoming of all types of obstacles – wire, rivers, high walls, etc.
13. All ranks in a Commando should be able to drive motorcycles, cars, lorries, tracked vehicles, trains and motorboats.
14. A high degree of efficiency in all forms of fieldcraft will be attained. Any man in a Commando must be able to forage for himself, cook and live under a bivouac for a considerable period.
15. All ranks are trained in first aid and will be capable of dealing with the dressing of gunshot wounds and the carrying of the wounded.
16. These are a few among the many standards of training that must be attained during service in a Commando. At all times a high standard of discipline is essential, and the constant desire by all ranks to be fitter and better trained than anyone else.
17. The normal mode of living is that the Special Service soldier will live in a billet found by himself and fed by the billet for which he will receive 6s. 8d. per day to pay all his expenses.
18. Any falling short of the standards of training and behaviour on the part of a Special Service soldier will render him liable to be returned to his unit.

**TRAINING ROUTINE**

| | |
|---|---|
| Weapons training | 19% |
| Fieldcraft, movement and tactics | 13% |
| Firing of weapons and field firing | 11% |
| PT including swimming, ropework and unarmed combat | 10% |
| Boatwork | 9% |
| Map reading | 8% |
| Speed marches | 6% |
| Night training | 5% |
| Mines and demolitions | 4% |
| Drill | 4% |
| Climbing | 3% |
| Set piece exercises | 3% |
| Training films | 3% |
| Medical lectures and first aid | 3% |

0800 followed by a parade and full inspection at 0900. A route march of varying distances was completed before lunch at 1300. After the meal, there was more physical training including swimming. Tea was at 1630 followed by a 45-minute lecture at 1700. The evening after 1800 was free or for company duties. The course lasted for three months, later reduced to five weeks and was divided up as shown in the table at left.

At the end of the course, there was a final 36-hour live firing exercise involving a night attack to simulate a Commando raid. During World War II, 25,000 men passed through Achnacarry Castle to become Commandos and entitled to wear the Green Beret. They came from many nations and included Belgians, French, Dutch, Norwegians, Poles and US Rangers, the American equivalent of the Commandos. After their time at the Commando Basic Training Centre, the proud owners of the Green Berets transferred to the holding operational Commando where they underwent further training in specialised tasks and occupations. When fully qualified, they then joined their own Commando units, most of which were stationed around the coast where nautical training could continue. The Commandos preferred to live in civilian billets rather than barracks where ordinary soldiers had to undertake many irksome chores such as guard duties and cookhouse fatigues. To this end, each individual Commando was given a daily allowance for his food and lodgings. An officer received 13s. 4d. (£0.67) while the other ranks got 6s. 8d. (£0.33) which was generous by the standards of the day.

Stan Weatherall joined No. 6 Commando in 1940:

> 'I was in No. 1 Troop. The Commando was in civilian billets with civvy ration cards and we were paid 6s 8d [33 pence] a day billeting allowance. The landladies in Scarborough asked £1. 10s [£1.50] a week, so the lads benefited by 16s 8d [83 pence] a week, which was not to be sneezed at when a pint of beer was just 6d [2.5 pence] and the better brands of fags 6d for twenty.'

By 1941 the Special Service Brigade comprised 11 Commandos. In February Nos. 1 and 2 Commandos left the brigade to become paratroopers. Each Commando unit now

Below: Landing craft were the essential tool for the Commandos, particularly smaller types such as this LCA or Landing Craft Assault. With a crew of one officer and three ratings, the LCA was 35 feet long and 9 feet in beam with a draught of 3 feet. It was capable of carrying a maximum of 35 Commandos. *CEC*

**Above:** With the Combined Operations badge on his arm, a Royal Navy rating oversees the disembarkation of Commandos from an LCA during a demonstration before King George VI. *CEC*

consisted of six troops rather than the original ten, with three officers and 62 other ranks in each troop. This allowed a troop to be carried in a pair of the new Assault Landing Craft or ALC then entering service. The chronic shortage of landing craft and assault ships to carry the Commandos had hitherto constrained Admiral Keyes and the staff of Combined Operations from planning large-scale raids as envisaged by Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

After contemplating operations in the Mediterranean, Keyes turned his eyes northwards to Norway, but not before three Commandos, Nos 7, 8 and 11 (Scottish), were despatched to the Middle East where they joined two locally recruited Commando units, Nos. 50 and 52 (ME). Together they became known as Layforce, of which more later. Layforce was named after its commander, Col Robert Laycock who was to become a legendary Commando leader during World War II.

From the moment he took over command of Combined Operations, Keyes had been obstructed by the higher echelons of the War Office. To them, the Commandos were an unacceptable drain of capable men and scant resources from the conventional forces which were desperately needed for home defence and the North African campaign. But, with Churchill's backing, the Commandos were not to be stifled at birth by Whitehall bureaucrats. The Prime Minister continued to badger for direct action against Nazi-occupied Europe through Commando raids that in his words:

> 'There comes out from the sea from time to time a hand of steel which plucks the German sentries from their posts with growing efficiency.'

# IN ACTION

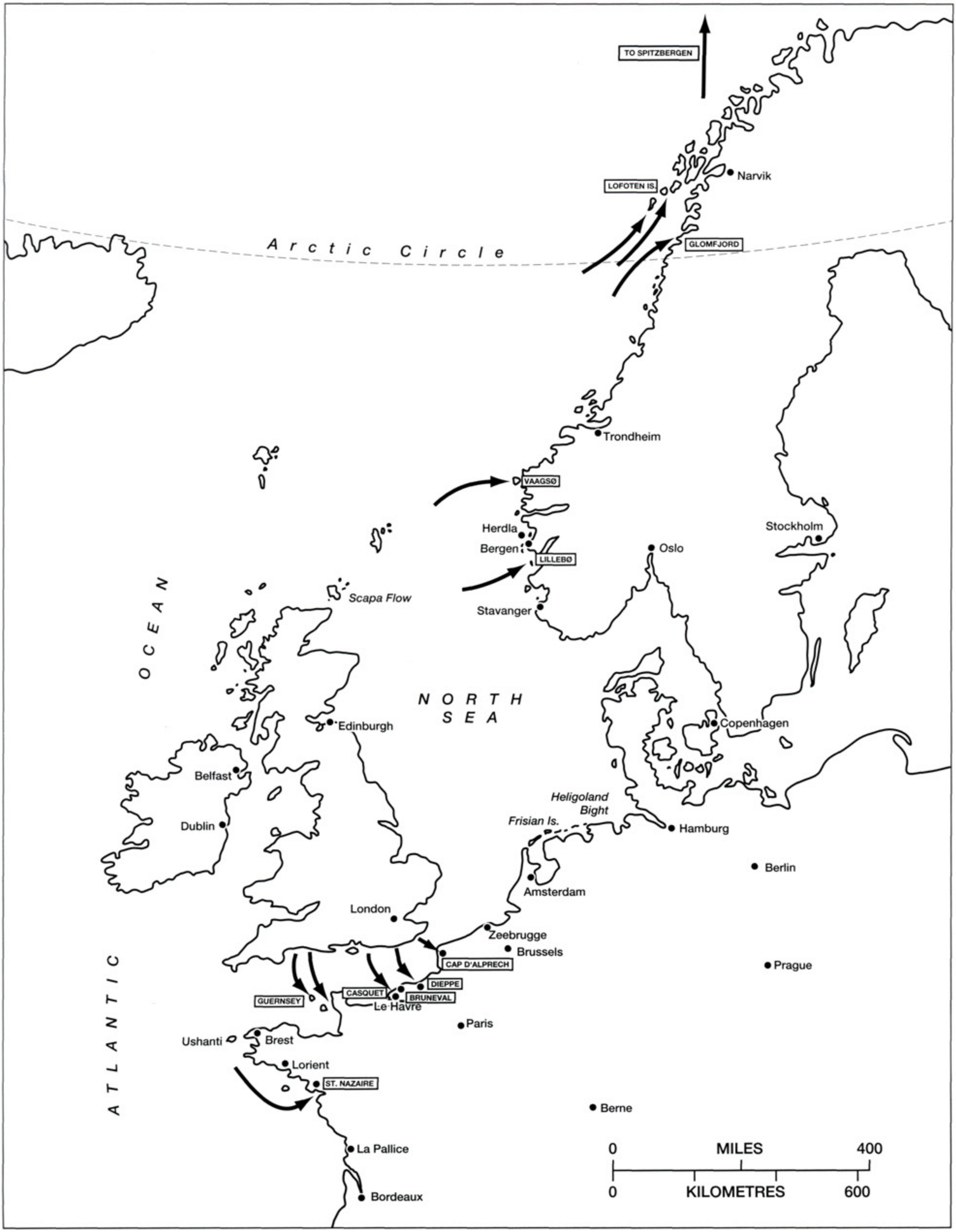
## THE STEEL HAND FROM THE SEA

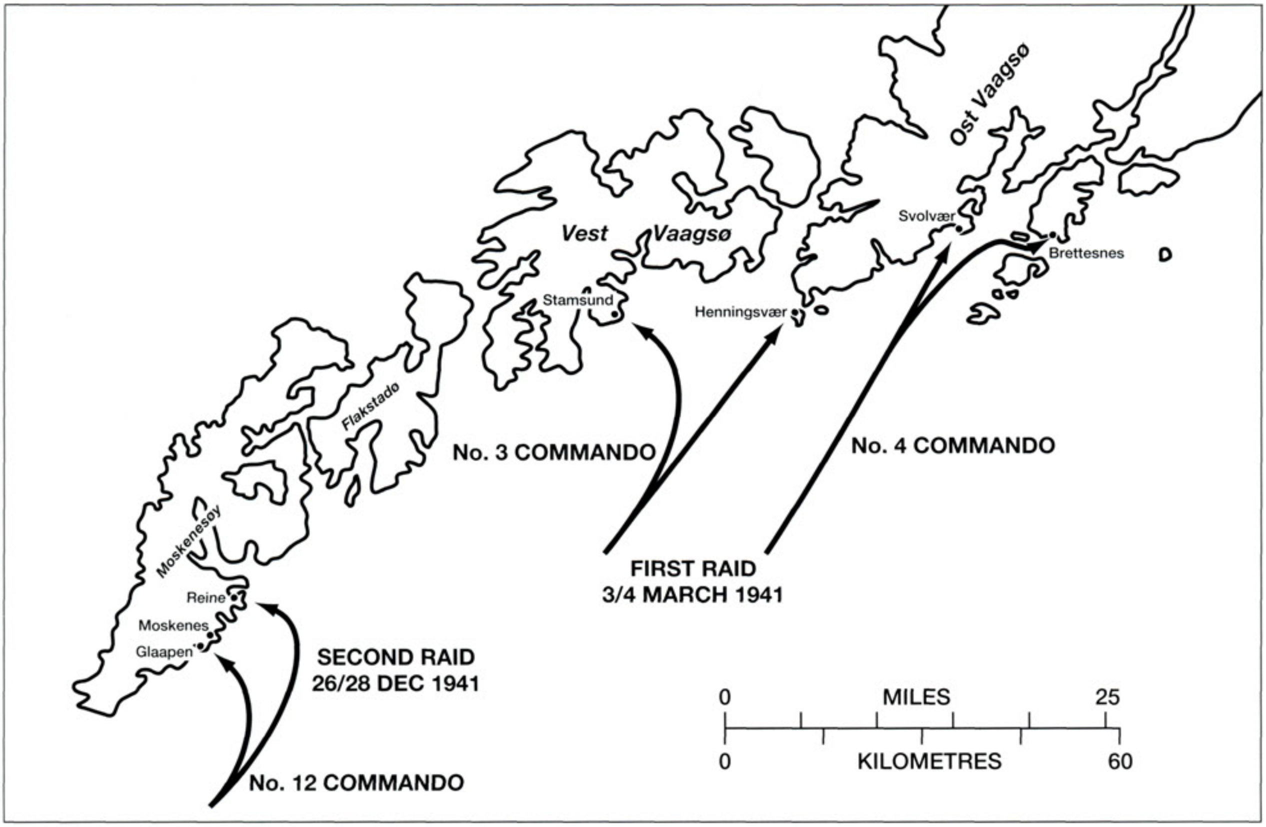
**Right:** Map of the main actions on the Continent by Commandos from British bases.

**Below:** Buildings and stores burn fiercely during the raid on Vaagsø as the troops of No. 3 Commando advance into the town against fierce German resistance. *IWM – N459*

The target for the first major Commando raid was the Norwegian Lofoten Islands lying just inside the Arctic Circle some 900 miles from Britain. The sparsely populated islands were home to generations of hardy fishermen with factories producing cod liver oil for medicinal purposes and glycerine that was a vital constituent in the manufacture of high explosives for the German war machine. These factories were located at four different ports: Brettesnes, Henningsvær, Stamsund and Svolvær. They were the targets for Operation Claymore. The raiding force embarked aboard a pair of converted cross-Channel ferries, the *Princess Beatrix* and *Princess Emma*, at Scapa Flow on 21 February 1941. Escorted by five destroyers of the Royal Navy, the raiders of Nos. 3 and 4 Special Service Battalions stopped off at the Faroe Islands for final training in assault landings. Once there they were given the instruction that the SS Battalions were to revert to the original Commando designation, with No. 3 SS Battalion becoming No. 4 Commando and No. 4 SS Battalion becoming No. 3 Commando. The force of Commandos comprised some 500 men supported by 52 Royal Engineers to undertake demolition tasks and 52 volunteers drawn from the Free Norwegian Forces to act as guides and interpreters. The task force set sail for Norway on 1 March 1941.

Designed as ferries for the relatively sheltered waters of the English Channel, the newly converted infantry landing ships wallowed and plunged their way across the turbulent North Sea and virtually every man aboard was seasick, but the flotilla arrived off the Lofoten Islands on schedule in the early hours of 4 March. In the intense cold, the Commandos clambered into their landing craft, huddling under their gas capes against the freezing sea spray, and made for the shoreline that was illuminated with no thought of blackouts in these northern climes. One Commando recalled: 'I was wearing two vests, two pullovers, a shirt, a Gieves waistcoat, a wool-lined mackintosh, and a pair of fur-lined boots and I was still cold.' The raiders achieved total surprise as they scrabbled over the icy quays and piles of frozen fish. At first, the Norwegian inhabitants thought it was a German landing exercise and gave the Commandos a half-hearted Nazi salute, but once the interlopers were recognised, jubilation erupted. However, there was no German garrison and so, to the Commandos' dismay, no fighting to be had, although several German soldiers were rounded up during the day. Lord Lovat of No. 4 Commando was not to be denied some action so he commandeered a motorbus and drove to a nearby seaplane base where he captured any German he could find. Meanwhile, the Sappers began the demolition of the various fish processing factories and the storage tanks of fish oil. In addition, 800,000 gallons of petrol and heating oil was destroyed as well as 18,000 tons of shipping. Among this total was a German gunboat, the *Krebs*, that gallantly engaged the destroyer HMS *Somali*, which promptly set it on fire.


TO SPITZBERGEN
LOFOTEN IS.
Narvik
Arctic Circle
GLOMFJORD
Trondheim
VAAGSØ
Herdla
Bergen
LILLEBØ
Oslo
Stockholm
Scapa Flow
Stavanger
OCEAN
NORTH SEA
Edinburgh
Copenhagen
Belfast
Dublin
Heligoland Bight
Frisian Is.
Hamburg
Berlin
Amsterdam
London
Zeebrugge
Brussels
CAP D'ALPRECH
Prague
DIEPPE
CASQUET
BRUNEVAL
GUERNSEY
Le Havre
Paris
ATLANTIC
Ushanti
Brest
Lorient
ST. NAZAIRE
Berne
La Pallice
Bordeaux
0 MILES 400
0 KILOMETRES 600



After some six hours ashore, the raiders withdrew, taking with them some 225 Germans, mostly merchant seamen, as prisoners of war, ten Quislings (Nazi collaborators) rounded up by the Norwegian detachment and 314 men and women who wished to join the Free Norwegian Forces in the war against Nazi Germany. Among the spoils of war was an incomplete set of wheels from a German Enigma encoding machine that proved to be of particular significance to the code breakers of Bletchley Park. Having suffered no serious casualties beyond an officer who shot himself in the thigh, the Commandos declared Operation Claymore a great success and they returned to a rapturous reception at Scapa Flow. The CO of No. 3 Commando, Lt-Col Durnford-Slater wrote: 'Altogether it had been a highly successful operation with no casualties and a good start to large-scale raids.'

But this was not to be. Much-needed landing craft were transferred to the Middle East and a task force, Force 110, was assembled for an assault on the Canary Islands but Operation Puma was cancelled, although elements of Force 110 were subsequently despatched to West Africa where they languished until February 1942. In August a successful attack by regular Canadian troops against the coalmines on the Norwegian Island of Spitzbergen did much to devalue the concept of Commandos as elite raiders in the eyes of the War Office. The Commandos were still seen as 'Churchill's Private Army' and few in the military hierarchy had any time for private armies. Their answer to the problem was to deny the Commandos the resources they needed, such as training areas or intelligence reports to allow them to mount raids. Further obstructionism was typified by the refusal of the War Office to allow the Commandos their own distinctive headgear, such as the 'red beret' that had recently been authorised for the Parachute Regiment, a younger formation than the Commandos.

**Above:** Attack on the Lofoten Islands, December 1941.

**Left:** With a Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife between his teeth, a sergeant and his men of No. 6 Commando fit fuses into their No. 36 grenades as their ship approaches the Norwegian coast prior to the raid on Vaagsø. *IWM – N503*

**Right:** Using ships' lifeboats as landing craft, members of No. 50 Middle East Commando come ashore at Kabrit on the shores of the Great Bitter Lake in August 1940. *CMC*

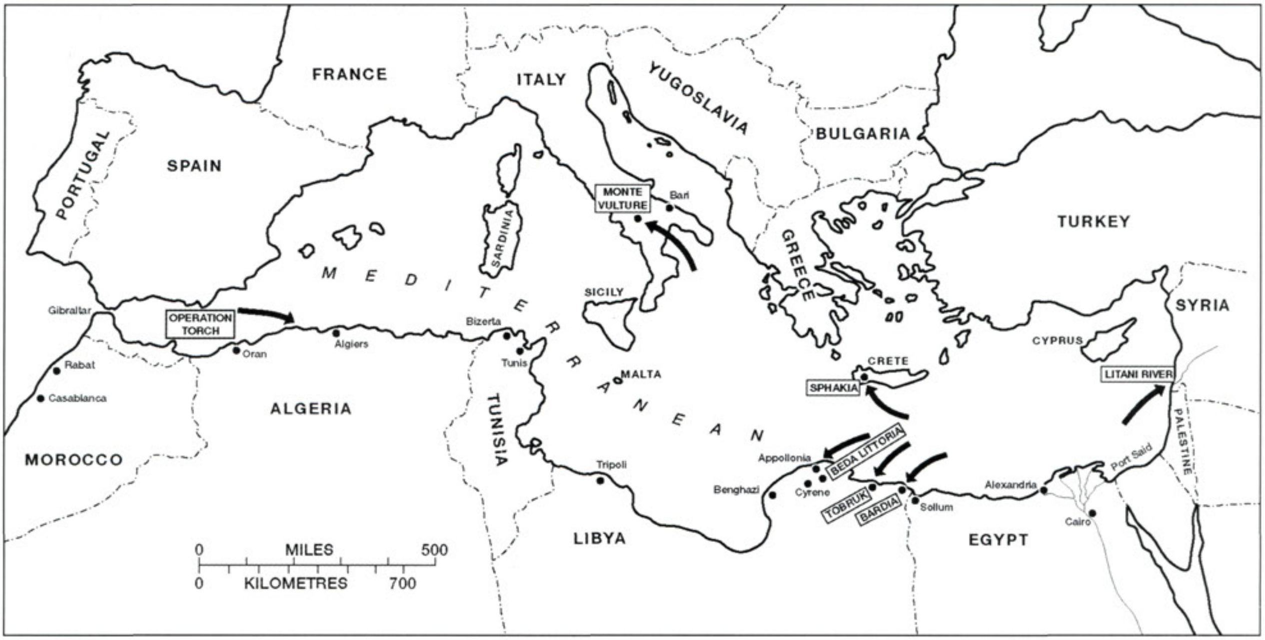
It was too much for Admiral Keyes. On 27 October, he stepped down as the Chief of Combined Operations and took his grievance to Parliament where he announced: 'After fifteen months as Chief of Combined Operations and having been frustrated at every turn in every worthwhile offensive action I have tried to undertake, I must fully endorse the Prime Minister's comments on the negative power of those who control the war machine in Whitehall.' The War Office's response was to send him a copy of the Official Secrets Act to ensure his silence. This was but naught to the tragedy to come. Just three weeks later, Admiral Keyes' son Geoffrey was killed leading a raid on Rommel's headquarters in North Africa. It could be of little consolation that Lt-Col Geoffrey Keyes was posthumously awarded the first Victoria Cross to be won by a Commando.

## LAYFORCE AND THE MIDDLE EAST COMMANDOS

Concurrently with the formation of the first Commandos in Britain, GHQ Middle East Land Forces was instructed to raise similar units from soldiers serving in Egypt and Palestine. The task was entrusted to Lt-Col George Young, Royal Engineers. The first to be formed was No. 50 Commando (Middle East) in July 1940 followed by Nos. 51 and 52 (ME) in October and November respectively. Once again, there were plenty of volunteers, including 70 Spaniards, veterans of the Spanish Civil War, who wished to serve in the British Army and gain British citizenship. No. 51 was unusual in that it was raised in Palestine and included both Arabs and Jews in an integrated unit under the command of a dynamic officer, Lt-Col Henry Cator.

Again, there were numerous objections heard from the commanding officers of line infantry units who were losing many of their best men. Some of these even took the opportunity to encourage their 'bad eggs' or more difficult soldiers to 'volunteer' for the Commandos and many of these ended up in No. 52 (ME). As is so often the case, many

**Below:** Commando operations in the Mediterranean theatre.


FRANCE
ITALY
YUGOSLAVIA
BULGARIA
PORTUGAL
SPAIN
MONTE VULTURE
Bari
SARDINIA
GREECE
TURKEY
MEDITERRANEAN
SICILY
SYRIA
Gibraltar
OPERATION TORCH
Oran
Algiers
Bizerta
Tunis
CYPRUS
Rabat
MALTA
CRETE
SPHAKIA
LITANI RIVER
Casablanca
ALGERIA
TUNISIA
PALESTINE
MOROCCO
Appollonia
BEDA LITTORIA
Port Said
Tripoli
Benghazi
Cyrene
TOBRUK
BARDIA
Sollum
Alexandria
Cairo
LIBYA
EGYPT
0
MILES
500
0
KILOMETRES
700

of these 'bad eggs' made excellent fighting men when allowed to escape the stifling discipline of normal units and follow the Commando credo of self-reliance although in No. 52 (ME), it did go too far as David Smiley, a company commander, recalled:

> 'Men were termed as "raiders." There was no saluting, no saying "Sir", no calling to attention on parades, and no marching in step. Some of the worst disciplined took advantage of this with disastrous results. When discipline had almost ceased to exist, normal army discipline was reintroduced with resulting improvements.'

All three units endured a similar regime of rigorous training with much emphasis on physical toughness including endurance marches across the desert and broken terrain of the 'jebels' with only limited water supplies. At the outset, the Commandos were based at Geneifa on the Great Bitter Lakes where amphibious training was undertaken. Due to a lack of landing craft, much of this was done using lifeboats borrowed from the ships at anchor in the lakes. Besides adopting the bush hat as their own particular headgear, the Middle East Commandos acquired their own type of fighting knife rather than the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger. Known as the 'fanny', it was a combination of a knuckleduster with a 7-inch blade; the fanny also became the design for the Middle East Commandos' own cap badge.

The first Commando raid by No. 50 (ME) was scheduled to occur on the night of 27/28 October 1940 with an attack on the Italian seaplane base at Bomba but, like so many other raids, it was cancelled at the last moment, on this occasion because of the Italian invasion of Greece. This action prompted the deployment of No. 50 Commando (ME) to Crete aboard the battleships HMS *Warspite* and *Valiant*. There they became part of 14 Infantry Brigade with the task of defending the island against an Axis invasion, a mission not best suited to the training and equipment of Commandos. It was made more difficult by the hospitality of the Cretans and the generous provision of wine over the Christmas period. Neither of the other two Commandos enjoyed any more success at this time with various schemes and raids cancelled or postponed although No. 52 (ME) was despatched to the Sudan where it arrived on 20 December 1940 to join the campaign against the Italians over the next months, as did No. 51 (ME) towards the end of January. Both Commandos fought with distinction and played a significant part in the defeat of the Italians in Ethiopia and Eritrea over the coming year.

As recounted above, Nos. 7, 8 and 11 (Scottish) Commandos were despatched to the Middle East as Force Z on 31 January 1941 aboard the new infantry assault ships HMS

### REORGANISATION OF SS COMPANIES INTO COMMANDOS

Special Service Brigade
(Brig R.E. Laycock)

No. 1 Cdo
No. 2 Cdo
No. 3 Cdo
No. 4 Cdo
No. 5 Cdo
No. 6 Cdo
No. 9 Cdo
No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Cdo
No. 12 Cdo
No. 14 Cdo
No. 30 Cdo
No. 40 (RM) Cdo
No. 41 (RM) Cdo
No. 62 Cdo
Special Boat Section
(and combined operations
assault pilotage parties)
Depot Section
(and snow warfare camp)

**Right:** The Chief of Combined Operations, Lord Louis Mountbatten, addresses the men of No. 6 Commando prior to Operation Myrmidon in April 1942 – an abortive raid on the Adour estuary in France. *IWM – H18696*

*Glenearn*, *Glengyle* and *Glenroy*. These were ships of the Glen Line that had been converted for Commando use with the lifeboat davits adapted to take assault landing craft and motor launches. Finally, the Commandos were procuring the naval assistance that was vital to their purpose. Under the command of Lt-Col Robert Laycock, Force Z sailed via South Africa and arrived at Geneifa on 10 March when it was renamed 'Layforce' for security reasons to disguise the fact that Commandos were in the Middle East theatre of operations. There they met up with Nos. 50 and 52 Commandos (ME) which had recently returned from Crete and the Sudan respectively. The two units were now amalgamated and placed under command of Layforce, which now had a strength of some 2,000 Commandos. This represented a formidable raiding force, but to avoid any reference to their Commando role, they were redesignated with No. 7 Commando becoming A Battalion; No. 8 – B Battalion; No. 11 (Scottish) – C Battalion, and the amalgamated Nos. 50 and 52 (ME) became D Battalion.

In the following months, various raids were proposed, planned and then cancelled, usually at the last minute, although A Battalion conducted a raid on the port of Bardia on the night of 19/20 April. Unfortunately this inflicted only minor damage at the high cost of 67 prisoners of war and several dead and injured. With the deteriorating military situation in Greece, Layforce was now stripped of its assault ships. When A Battalion disembarked from HMS *Glengyle* for the last time at the beginning of May it left a heartfelt message in one of the troop decks: 'Never in the whole history of human endeavour have so few been buggered about by so many.' By the end of the month, Layforce was broken up, with C Battalion being deployed to Cyprus and the remaining battalions to Crete where they arrived on 27 May to counter the German airborne

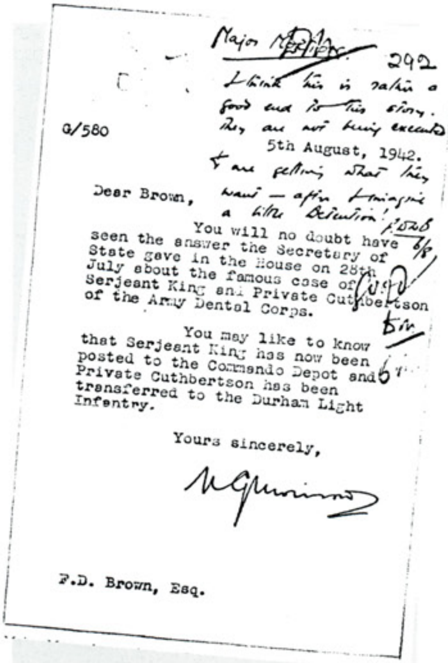
**Below:** The Italian garrison of Amba Alagi surrenders on 17 May 1941 after the decisive attack by No. 51 Middle East Commando on a feature later called Commando Hill. After a successful campaign in Eritrea and Ethiopia, No. 51 ME Commando returned to Geneifa in Egypt and was disbanded. *CMC*

invasion that had been underway for a week. Under the command of Col Laycock, the 800-man force landed at Suda Bay just as survivors from the sunken destroyers HMS *Kashmir* and *Kelly* were being rescued. The captain of the stricken HMS *Kelly* was soon to figure highly in the story of the Commandos. As the military situation in Crete fell apart, Layforce fought a series of rearguard actions across the rugged island to the south coast where the Royal Navy evacuated the British Commonwealth forces from Sphakia. All the while, German Stukas subjected them to repeated dive-bombing raids. Among the Commandos was the famous writer, Evelyn Waugh, who summed up the general opinion of the dive-bombing by commenting 'that like all things German it was very efficient and went on much too long.' Tragically, just 200 Commandos escaped from the Crete debacle, a casualty rate of 75 per cent.

In June and July Commando operations continued, with C Battalion fighting on the Litani River in Vichy French Syria and B Battalion conducting a successful raid on Tobruk, but the number of casualties suffered was far too high to be sustained and in August Layforce was disbanded by order of GHQ Middle East Land Forces. In London, Churchill was furious and he immediately demanded that a new Commando force be created but this time under the command of the Royal Navy because, in his words: 'Middle East Command has indeed maltreated and thrown away this valuable force.' With Brigadier Laycock as the local Director of Combined Operations, the much-depleted Middle East Commando comprised various elements of the Special Forces in the region with L Detachment of the Special Air Service (SAS) as No. 2 Troop; the remnants of C Battalion or No. 11 Commando (Scottish) as No. 3 Troop under the command of Lt-Col Geoffrey Keyes; No. 51 Commando (ME) as Nos. 4 and 5 Troops and the Special Boat Service as No. 6 Troop. There was also an HQ and Depot Troop based at Geneifa.

As indicated above, No. 3 Troop was formed from men of C Battalion but they had always referred to themselves as No. 11 Commando (Scottish) throughout all the various redesignations of the previous year. They were now to embark on one of the most dramatic Commando raids of the war – the attempted assassination of the 'Desert Fox', General Erwin Rommel, the commander of the German Afrika Korps. The attack was to coincide with the launching of a major offensive by the British Commonwealth Eighth Army to relieve the entrapped garrison at Tobruk under the codename of Operation Crusader. The object of the raid was to disrupt the Axis High Command before battle was joined. The raid was known as Operation Flipper and the six officers and 53 men of the 'Scottish Commando', under the command of Brigadier Laycock, embarked aboard two submarines on the evening of 10 November with four specific targets, including Rommel's house at Beda Littoria and Italian HQ buildings.

Due to heavy seas, only two detachments were able to land, including Lt-Col Keyes and 17 Commandos from HMS *Torbay*. On the stormy night of 17/18 November 1941, friendly Arabs guided Keyes and his men to a building at Sidi Rafa, and not Beda Littoria, that was supposedly Rommel's resting place for the night. At the stroke of midnight, they attacked and in the ensuing firefight Keyes was mortally wounded. Unfortunately Rommel was absent at the time, but three colonels on his staff and a number of other soldiers were killed and wounded. The rest of the raiders withdrew to the beaches, a distance of some 18 miles over difficult terrain, where they found the seas too rough for them to be picked up by the Royal Navy so they were forced to go into hiding. Over the coming days, the Germans and hostile Arabs tracked down the dwindling band of Commandos and they were either killed or captured. Only Brig Laycock and Sgt Jack Terry, who had fought side by side with Col Keyes, escaped in an epic 41-day march across the desert to reach friendly lines on Christmas Day 1941. Although Operation Flipper failed in its intention, the Commandos gained their first Victoria Cross, which was awarded posthumously to Keyes.



Major [illegible]

292

I think this is rather a good end to this story. They are not being executed & are getting what they want — after enjoying a little detention!

F.D.B. 6/8

Q/580

5th August, 1942.

Dear Brown,

You will no doubt have seen the answer the Secretary of State gave in the House on 28th July about the famous case of Serjeant King and Private Cuthbertson of the Army Dental Corps.

You may like to know that Serjeant King has now been posted to the Commando Depot and Private Cuthbertson has been transferred to the Durham Light Infantry.

Yours sincerely,

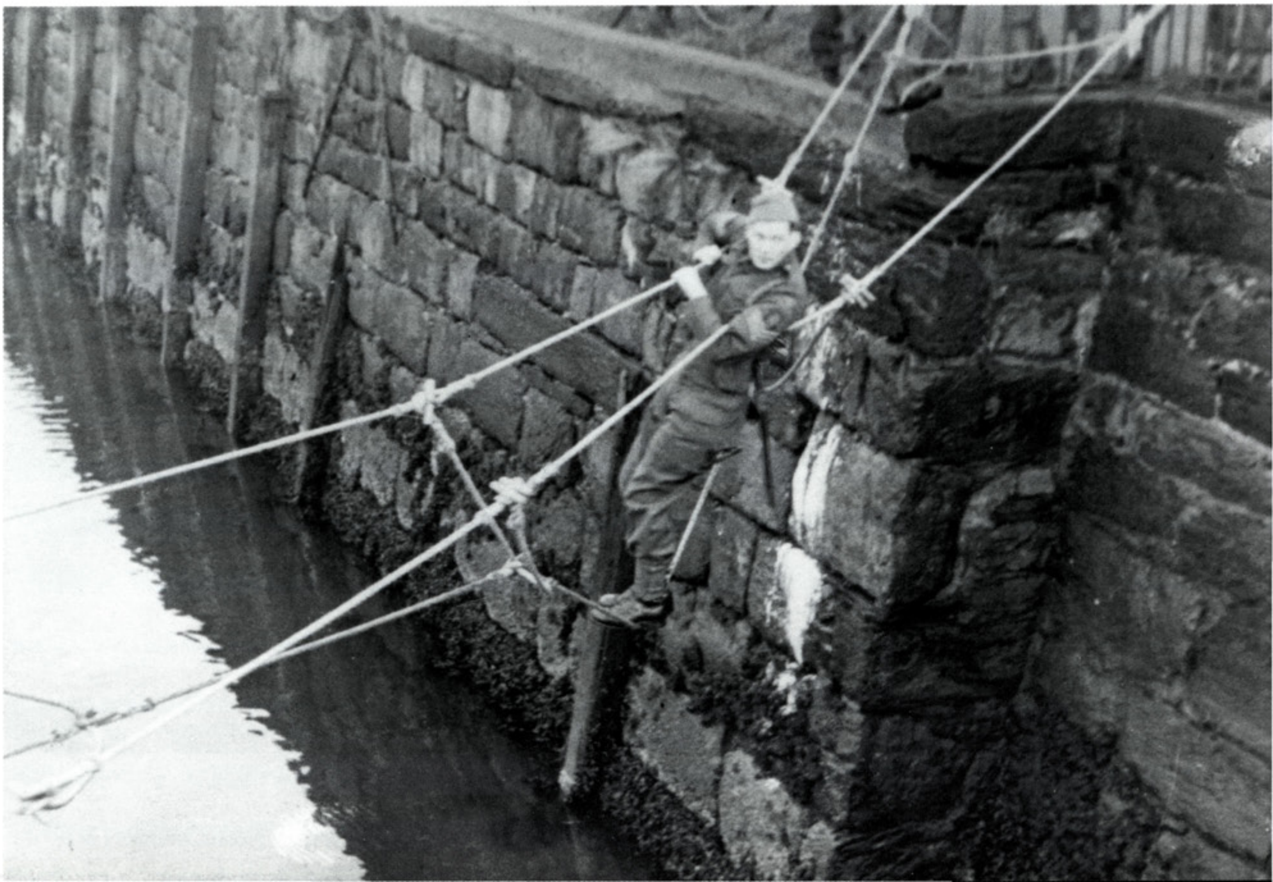
F.D. Brown, Esq.

In mid-1942, Sgt P. King of the Army Dental Corps wrote a letter to Winston Churchill stating his dismay at not being allowed to transfer to a combat unit and explaining that he had decided that he and another soldier, Pte L. Cuthbertson, would conduct their own Commando raid on France and kill at least 50 Germans. The two went AWOL after taking two pistols and 41 rounds of ammunition. On 2 May, they hired a motorboat with seven gallons of fuel and set off for France, landing near the port of Cherbourg. After failing to engage the enemy, they returned to their boat but ran out of fuel and they drifted in the Channel for 15 days before being picked up by a destroyer. After a spell in hospital, the two were court-martialled but both subsequently got their wish, with Cuthbertson joining the Durham Light Infantry and the now Private King being posted to the Commandos. King regained his sergeant's stripes and won a battlefield commission with No. 4 Commando in Normandy. He finished the war as a lieutenant with a Military Cross. *CMC*

**Right:** Lt-Col Charles Vaughan was the dynamic and forceful commandant at Achnacarry and insured the high level of training that was characteristic of all Commandos. *CMC*

**Below:** A sergeant of No. 2 (Dutch) Troop of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando demonstrates the use of Commando toggle ropes in making a makeshift bridge during training at Portmadoc harbour in Wales. *CMC*

**Far right:** With a toggle rope around his neck Sgt Joseph Peirlot of No. 4 (Belgian) Troop of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando displays his Belgian Royal Lion cap badge on his green beret. *CMC*



**Right:** The attack on Vaagsø.

As the fateful year of 1942 dawned, the Middle East Commando was allowed to wither on the vine, despite Churchill's demands, and its personnel were gradually absorbed into the plethora of Special Forces now operating in the vast sand seas of North Africa including the SAS, the Long Range Desert Group, Popski's Private Army and the Special Interrogation Group.

## 1942 – THE YEAR OF THE GREAT RAIDS

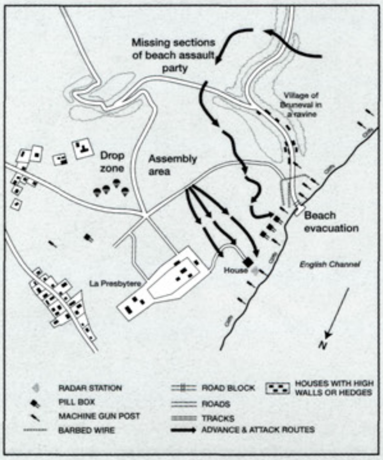
After his eventful time during Operation Flipper, Brig Laycock returned to Britain to succeed Brig Charles Haydon as Commander, Special Service Brigade. Haydon was promoted to major-general and became the deputy to the new Chief of Combined Operations, Lord Louis Mountbatten, the erstwhile captain of HMS *Kelly* that had been sunk in the battle for Crete. Now promoted to Commodore and shortly to become Vice-Admiral, Mountbatten succeeded Admiral Keyes on 27 October 1941. As a cousin of the King and a consummate establishment figure, he had far more influence within the military hierarchy than his predecessor and he put it to good effect to promote the Commandos. Mountbatten was determined to conduct the large-scale raids as originally envisaged by Churchill and Keyes. With his naval background, he was able to command greater resources from the Senior Service, particularly in the construction of more landing craft.

With the Soviet Union now an ally under dire threat from the advancing German Panzers, planning went ahead for another raid on Norway to relieve some pressure on the Russians. Codenamed Operation Archery, the objective was to attack the German garrison in the town of Vaagsø in southwest Norway. The troops chosen for the raid were Lt-Col Durnford-Slater's No. 3 Commando supported by two troops from No. 2 Commando and a medical detachment from No. 4 Commando as well as a party of demolition specialists from 101 Troop and some soldiers of the Free Norwegian Forces. As a diversion, 300 men of No. 12 Commando were to mount another raid on the Lofoten Islands under the codename Operation Anklet. The naval task force set sail from Scapa Flow on Christmas Eve 1941, with the Commandos aboard the infantry assault ships *Prince Charles* and *Prince Leopold.* On the following day, the Commandos made five separate landings in and around the port of Vaagsø and the neighbouring island of Maaloy where the coastal artillery batteries were situated. The German garrison in Vaagsø was taken completely by surprise when the 600 Commandos stormed ashore but they soon began a stiff resistance. Lt-Col Durnford-Slater led the main assault party of No. 3 Commando against the town of Vaagsø while his second-in-command, Maj Jack Churchill, attacked the nearby small island of Maaloy. Another of the great wartime Commandos, 'Mad Jack' Churchill, entered battle playing the bagpipes before drawing his Claymore. With him was another legendary Commando, Capt Peter Young, the commander of 6 Troop, and together these attackers soon overran the gun batteries on Maaloy.

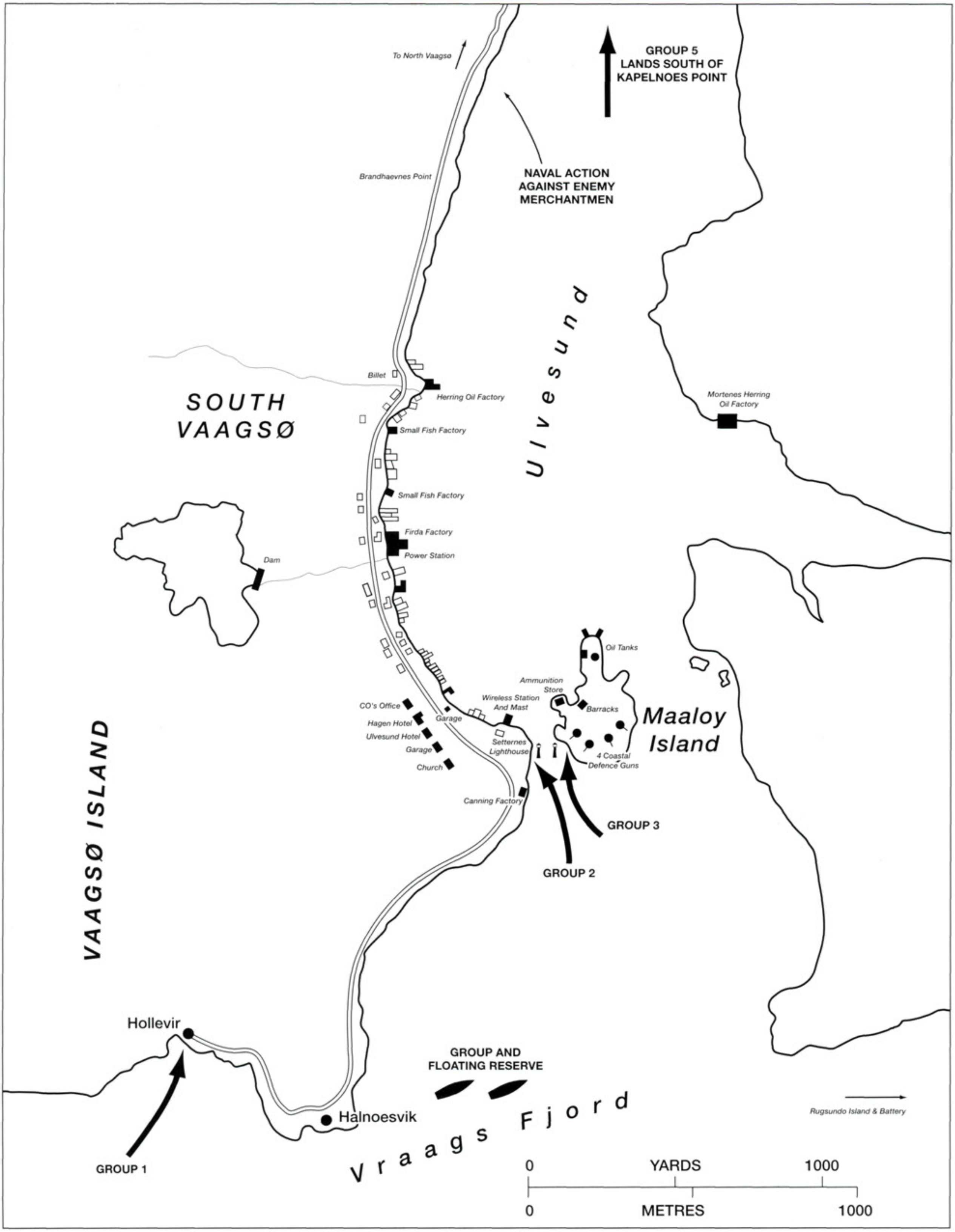
However, the fighting in Vaagsø was now fierce, with the Germans resisting house by house. Capt Young and his troop were despatched from Maaloy to the town as reinforcements. They were soon in the thick of the fighting, as one of his men recalled:

> 'Our Captain led the attack here, and although it was slow as we had to go from house to house, we were able to spot and shoot the snipers who were doing the damage… One of our sergeants received three shots in the back from a sniper who had let us pass. We opened fire on this sniper's window and settled him. We dashed to the next house… we threw in petrol, set fire to it and went on our way… '

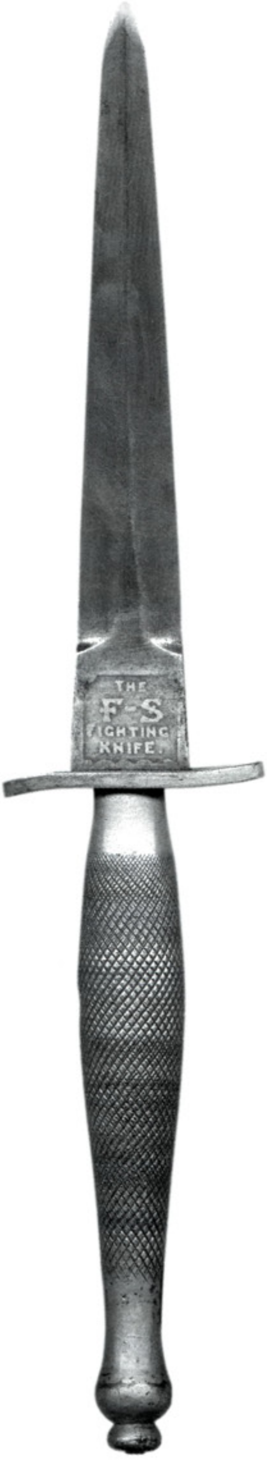
### BRUNEVAL



The Parachute Regiment began life as a commando unit before becoming a separate entity with the famous 'red beret'. Its first major success was the airborne raid on a German radar station at Bruneval near the port of Le Havre on the night of 27/28 February 1942. Under the command of Maj John Frost, 120 men of the 2nd Parachute Battalion dropped near to the Würzburg radar site together with Royal Engineers and a radar specialist to learn its secrets and remove critical parts for analysis. Meanwhile, Commandos had landed to attack the beach pillboxes defending the radar site from a seaborne assault and cover the withdrawal of the raiders to the waiting landing craft for their return to England. At a cost of just two dead and four wounded, the secrets of the Würzburg were revealed and Operation Biting was a classic example of Combined Operations with various different formations working in concert.


To North Vaagsø
GROUP 5
LANDS SOUTH OF
KAPELNOES POINT
Brandhaevnes Point
NAVAL ACTION
AGAINST ENEMY
MERCHANTMEN
Ulvesund
Billet
Herring Oil Factory
SOUTH
VAAGSØ
Mortenes Herring
Oil Factory
Small Fish Factory
Small Fish Factory
Firda Factory
Power Station
Dam
Oil Tanks
Ammunition
Store
Barracks
Maaloy
Island
Wireless Station
And Mast
CO's Office
Hagen Hotel
Ulvesund Hotel
Garage
Garage
Church
Setternes
Lighthouse
4 Coastal
Defence Guns
Canning Factory
GROUP 3
GROUP 2
VAAGSØ ISLAND
Hollevir
GROUP AND
FLOATING RESERVE
Halnoesvik
Vraags Fjord
Rugsundo Island & Battery
GROUP 1
0
YARDS
1000
0
METRES
1000

**Right:** Map of the St Nazaire action.



**Below:** First model Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife. See box page 32. *Mark Franklin*

Peter Young and his sergeant, George Herbert, were observed by Lt-Col Durnford-Slater who reported: 'They appeared to be enjoying themselves.' For his actions, Capt Young was awarded the first of his three Military Crosses. By the early afternoon the town was cleared with some 150 Germans killed. The raiders then withdrew to their ships and were re-embarked by 1445 hours.

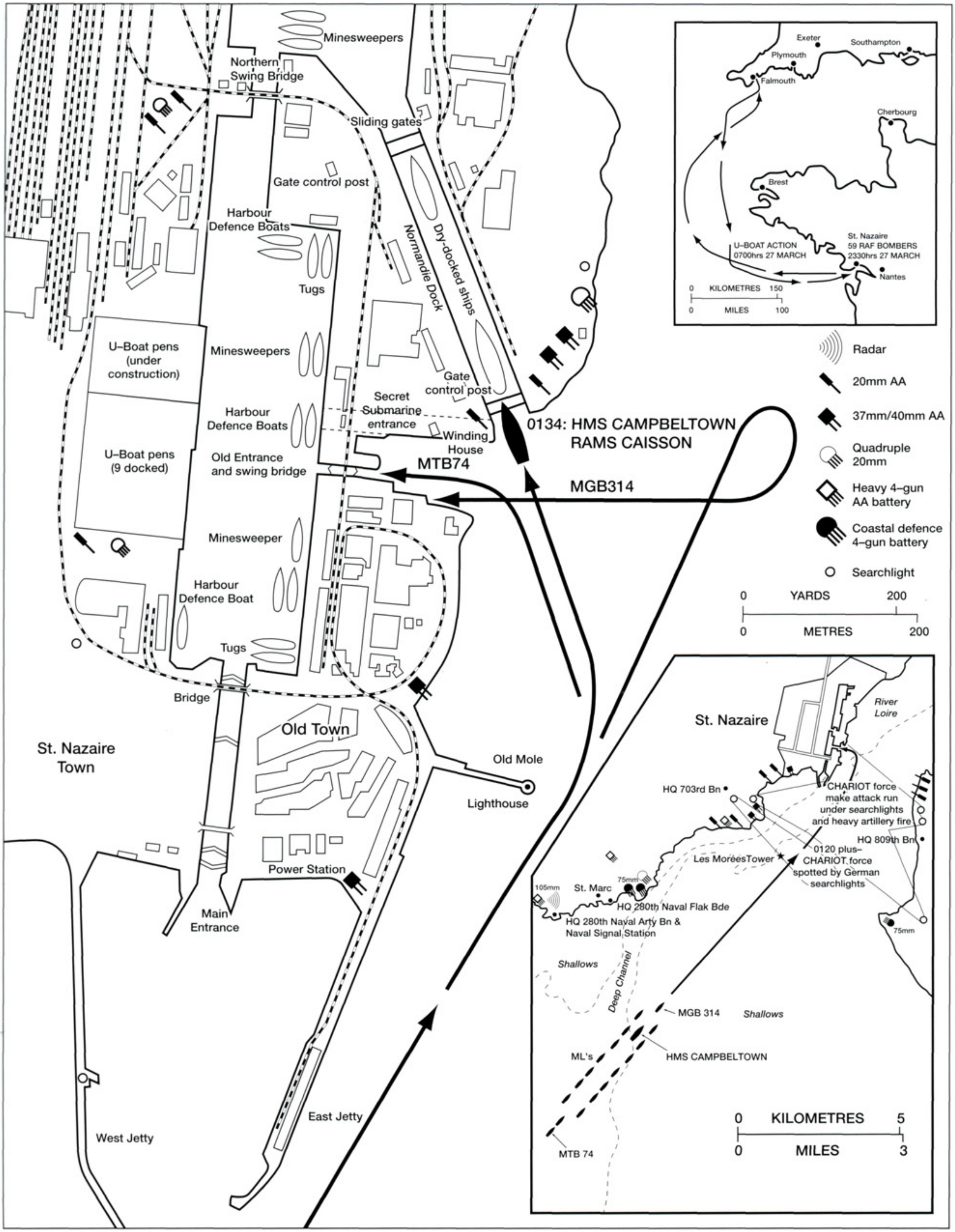
Operation Archery had been a success but not without cost. Commando casualties were 19 dead and 57 wounded, but they left behind widespread destruction; the fish processing factories had been razed to the ground and 15,000 tons of shipping sunk by the supporting Royal Navy warships. In addition, 98 Germans were taken as prisoners of war together with four Quislings, but these were greatly outnumbered by the 70 loyal Norwegians who wished to join the Free Norwegian Forces. Tragically, the Germans exacted a terrible revenge and many Norwegians were either executed or deported to concentration camps as reprisals for the raids. Accordingly, at the behest of King Haakon of Norway, no further Commando raids were conducted against his country, but the Vaagsø and Lofoten raids convinced Hitler that Norway remained 'the zone of destiny' and a probable invasion route for the Allies. German reinforcements of men and capital ships poured into the country, and by the end of the war almost 400,000 troops and all their equipment were stationed there at the expense of the fighting fronts – which was a remarkably cost-effective return for a few daring raids conducted by less than a thousand Commandos supported by the long reach of the Royal Navy. The steel hand had certainly struck from the sea.

## ST NAZAIRE

With the *Tirpitz* now stationed in Norwegian waters and lurking deep inside various fjords, the mighty battleship posed a serious threat to Britain's supply convoys plying through the inhospitable Arctic Sea to the Soviet Union. Equally, if the *Tirpitz* were to break out into the North Atlantic, as its sister ship the *Bismarck* had done the year before, Britain's own maritime supply lines would lie at the mercy of the massive surface raider and her cohorts, the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. The *Tirpitz* became an obsession with Churchill and he wrote: 'The whole strategy of the war turns at this period on this ship.' At his direction, all measures were to be taken to deny it the opportunity of operating in the Atlantic Ocean. Various studies were undertaken to this end. To be viable as a surface raider, the *Tirpitz* needed a base on the Atlantic seaboard where it could be replenished and, if necessary, repaired. There was only one port in France with a dry dock large enough to accommodate the 42,000-ton battleship – St Nazaire and its huge Forme Ecluse, which was the largest dry dock in Europe, capable of taking ships up to 85,000 tons. It was the birthplace of the pre-war French luxury liner *Normandie* and it was by this name that the dock was normally known. If the Normandie Dock was denied to the Germans, it was unlikely that the Kriegsmarine would risk its only remaining modern battleship in the open seas of the Atlantic.

The idea of destroying the dock was first mooted by Admiral Keyes in July 1941 and preliminary planning was undertaken. Bombing by the RAF was considered but it was soon discounted, as any attack from the air would have inflicted unacceptable casualties among the French population of St Nazaire. Furthermore, the massive concrete structure was largely impervious to high explosives. The key elements of the Normandie Dock were the caissons or dock gates that held back the waters when a ship was in dry dock; the pumping house that drained the waters from inside the dock and the winding mechanism that moved the caissons across the entrances to the dock itself. Together, they presented a formidable target; each caisson was a massive steel structure weighing hundreds of tons.

The task of destroying the dock was given to Combined Operations and specifically to No. 2 Commando under Lt-Col Charles Newman. The main assault force comprised some


Minesweepers
Northern Swing Bridge
Sliding gates
Gate control post
Harbour Defence Boats
Tugs
Normandie Dock
Dry-docked ships
U-Boat pens (under construction)
Minesweepers
Gate control post
Secret Submarine entrance
Harbour Defence Boats
Winding House
0134: HMS CAMPBELTOWN RAMS CAISSON
U-Boat pens (9 docked)
Old Entrance and swing bridge
MTB74
MGB314
Minesweeper
Harbour Defence Boat
Tugs
Bridge
Old Town
St. Nazaire Town
Old Mole
Lighthouse
Power Station
Main Entrance
East Jetty
West Jetty
Exeter
Southampton
Plymouth
Falmouth
Cherbourg
Brest
U-BOAT ACTION 0700hrs 27 MARCH
St. Nazaire 59 RAF BOMBERS 2330hrs 27 MARCH
Nantes
0 KILOMETRES 150
0 MILES 100
Radar
20mm AA
37mm/40mm AA
Quadruple 20mm
Heavy 4-gun AA battery
Coastal defence 4-gun battery
Searchlight
0 YARDS 200
0 METRES 200
St. Nazaire
River Loire
HQ 703rd Bn
CHARIOT force make attack run under searchlights and heavy artillery fire
HQ 809th Bn
0120 plus– CHARIOT force spotted by German searchlights
Les Morées Tower
105mm
St. Marc
75mm
HQ 280th Naval Flak Bde
HQ 280th Naval Arty Bn & Naval Signal Station
75mm
Shallows
Deep Channel
MGB 314
Shallows
ML's
HMS CAMPBELTOWN
MTB 74
0 KILOMETRES 5
0 MILES 3

150 men from No. 2 and demolition parties from Nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 9 and 12 Commandos making up another 80. But any amount of explosives carried by these men would make little impression on the steel caisson. Accordingly, Capt John Hughes-Hallett, RN, one of the most brilliant minds in Combined Operations during World War II, came up with the idea of ramming the outer caisson at high speed with a destroyer whose bows were to be packed with four tons of explosives. These were to be detonated by time delay once the raiders had withdrawn. The vessel chosen for the task was the elderly American 'four stacker' USS *Buchanan* that had been transferred to the Royal Navy and renamed HMS *Campbeltown*. Her captain was Lt-Cdr Sam Beattie, RN.

However, the port of St Nazaire lay six miles up the Loire River and its approaches were protected by heavy coastal defences with numerous weapons ranging from 20mm to 170mm guns as well as a 240mm rail-mounted gun for engaging warships closing with the coastline. Most of these guns were sited to cover the deep water channel from the estuary to the port so the British decided to approach over the mudflats, though these were only navigable at a high spring tide. This determined the date of the raid but even so the Commandos were obliged to use vulnerable shallow-draught wooden motor launches rather than their armoured assault landing craft. HMS *Campbeltown* had to be stripped of excess weight to reduce its draught so that she could negotiate the mudflats. She was also modified by removing two of the four funnels to resemble the *Möwe* Class German frigates that were based at St Nazaire. By this subterfuge, and by flying Kriegsmarine battle flags, it was hoped that the naval force and the accompanying Commandos in their motor launches would be able to negotiate much of the Loire estuary and reach St Nazaire before the German defenders engaged them. Once they gained the port and HMS *Campbeltown* had rammed the caisson, the Commandos were to destroy the pump house and the winding mechanism and, if the opportunity arose, inflict as much damage as possible on the nearby U-boat pens. It was a high-risk venture by any stretch of the imagination and one senior officer was heard to say: 'There's certainly a VC in it.' In the event there were to be five.

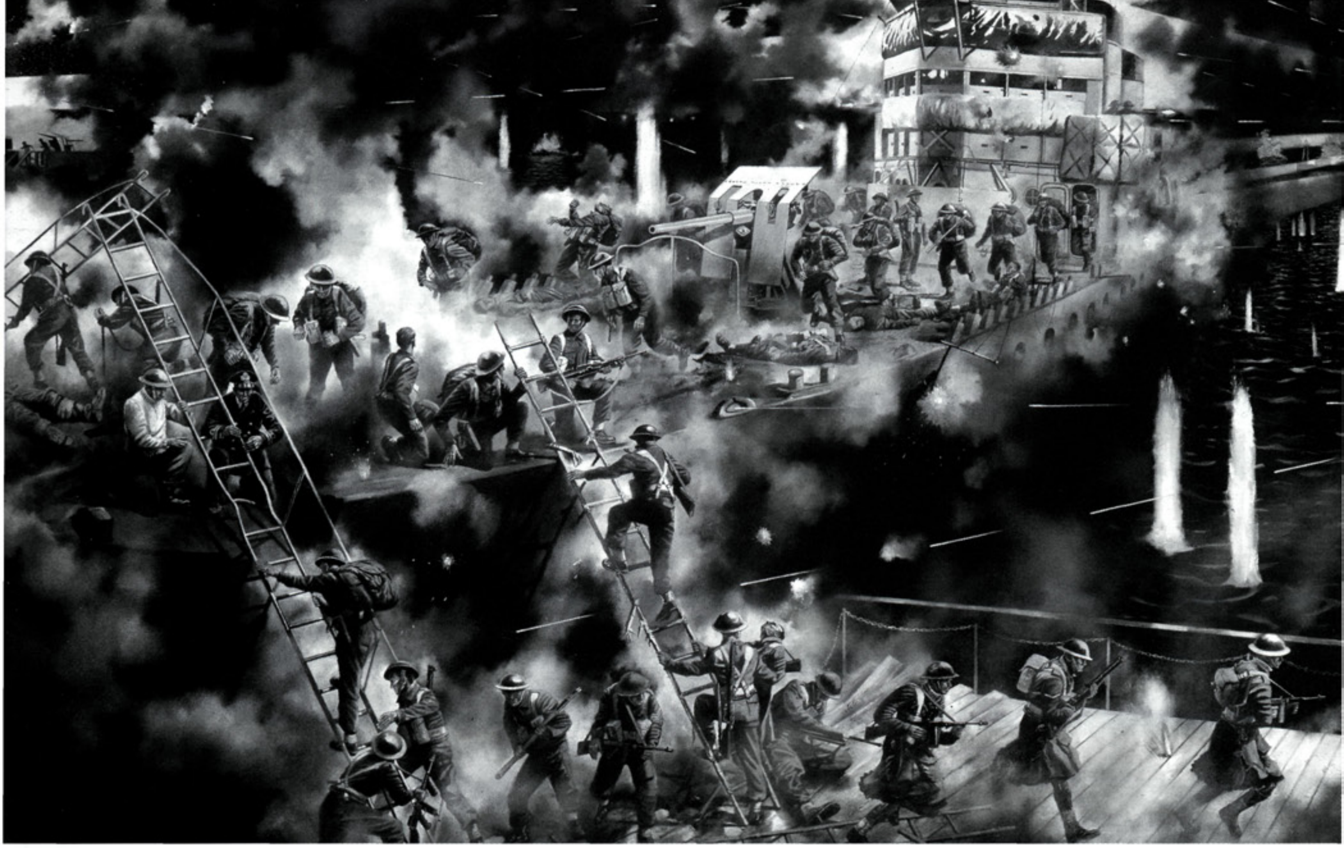
The Chiefs of Staff approved the plans for Operation Chariot on 3 March. A full-scale rehearsal was conducted against Devonport dockyard as it bore some resemblance to St Nazaire. The raiders were routed by the elderly Home Guard defenders of the dockyard. Corporal Arthur Woodwiss of No. 2 Commando recalled the occasion:

> 'We had plans of the dock area [St Nazaire] which we had to draw and redraw and a wonderful scale model which we could study in different light to help us identify our targets. As an assault group commander I rehearsed street fighting to the gun positions I had to demolish. Our full dress rehearsal at Devonport against the Home Guard was an absolute disaster and the Home Guard were delighted but we knew it would be all right on the night. If you have to make mistakes it is best to make them in training.'

The demolition parties also practised at the King George V Dock at Southampton which had similar pumping and winding machinery buildings to those of the Normandie Dock. The teams were soon able to undertake their demolition tasks in complete darkness. The plan was now set and it only waited on the spring tides for the maximum depth of water over the mudflats of the Loire estuary. The tides were high when Admiral Karl Dönitz, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine's U-boat forces, visited St Nazaire on 27 March 1942. He asked the garrison commander what preparations had been made in case of a seaborne assault to which he was told that plans were in place but nobody actually believed that such a raid was feasible. Dönitz replied tersely: 'I shouldn't be too sure of that.' He was absolutely right; the raiders were already on the high seas.

### FAIRBAIRN AND SYKES

The Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife became the symbol of the Commandos during World War 2 and remains one of the most famous military edged weapons of all time. Capt William Ewart Fairbairn was formally an Assistant Commissioner of the Shanghai Municipal Police during the 1930s when the Chinese port had a widespread reputation as a decadent but lawless city. Fairbairn was in charge of the crack Reserve Unit (the equivalent of a modern SWAT team) that fought a continuous campaign against the drug and prostitution rackets of the fearsome Triads. As part of the Reserve Unit there was a special Sniper Unit commanded by Capt Eric Antony Sykes. During their time in Shanghai, the two policemen encountered all the multifarious edged weapons of the Chinese underworld and gained extensive knowledge and expertise in knife fighting. Their skills were readily employed by the Commandos when Fairbairn and Sykes became the principal instructors in close combat training at the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry. The two officers sought and received approval from the War Office to design a fighting knife specifically for the Commandos, which could be attached wherever on the uniform or webbing for immediate accessibility. Fairbairn's philosophy was simple – 'In war you can't afford the luxury of squeamishness. Either you kill or capture or you will be captured or killed. We've got to be tough and we've got to be ruthless – tougher and more ruthless than our enemies'. Fairbairn especially favoured attacks on the brachial, radial, carotid and subclavian arteries. The thrust to the carotid was preferred for the rapid elimination of a sentry, since loss of consciousness usually occurred within five seconds and death soon thereafter. Harry Pexton of No.2 Commando recalled the two close combat instructors – 'They were lethal. They had loops inside their coats with knuckle-dusters and knives and hand grenades and sawn-off revolvers. They were a terrible pair of men, but very nice men. They could teach you all sorts of very nasty ways to kill people. Fortunately, I suppose we never had need to practise them properly, but they were there just in case'.



**Above:** With the prow of HMS *Campbeltown* deeply embedded in the caisson of the Normandie Dock, the Commando demolition parties use assault ladders to disembark before they destroy the dock's pumping and winching equipment. At 1130 hours on 28 March 1942, the four tons of explosives packed inside the destroyer exploded killing at least 380 Germans and disabling the dock. Without the use of the Normandie Dock, the mighty battleship *Tirpitz* did not dare to venture into the Atlantic and never sank a single ton of Allied shipping. It remained lurking in Norwegian fjords until sunk on 12 November 1944 by Tallboy bombs dropped by the Lancasters of Nos. 9 and 617 Squadrons RAF. Operation Chariot was recognised as the 'greatest Commando raid of all' and the Normandie Dock was not fully repaired until 1948. *Reproduction courtesy of the artist David Rowlands*

Operation Chariot got underway on 26 March 1942 when the naval force, under the command of Capt Robert Ryder, RN, set sail from Falmouth accompanied by 16 Fairmile motor launches carrying most of the 277 Commandos; a total force of 630 sailors and soldiers. After several scares en route that might have compromised the security of the operation, the 19-strong flotilla entered the Loire estuary at 2300 hours on 27 March and, with HMS *Campbeltown* in the van, it sailed up the river over the mudflats. Twice the ancient destroyer shuddered as it touched ground but it wrenched herself free each time. At 2330 hours, the RAF began a diversionary air raid but it only alerted the defenders and they began to signal *Campbeltown* as to its identity despite the Kriegsmarine battle flag. A fluent German speaking Royal Navy signaller, Leading Signaller Pike, wearing the uniform of a German petty officer, countered the challenge by using responses gleaned from German naval code books captured during the Vaagsø raid. The German gunners held their fire for several vital minutes as *Campbeltown* surged on towards the target. Searchlights now played on the flotilla from the shoreline and the Germans opened fire at 0122. Captain Ryder in *Motor Gun Boat 314* sent the international signal: 'Am being fired on by friendly forces.' The fire slackened and by now the flotilla had passed the heaviest batteries. At 0127 *Campbeltown* came under heavy fire. The crew hauled down the false colours and the White Ensign broke out at the masthead.

Capt Ryder later wrote: 'For about five minutes the sight was staggering, both sides loosing off with everything they had. The air was full of tracer, flying horizontally and at close range.' Casualties began to mount aboard the vulnerable motor launches and on the decks of HMS *Campbeltown*, despite the armoured shields for the Commando demolition teams. The bridge was hit and the coxswain killed. *Campbeltown* veered off course as a Commando wrestled with the wheel before a naval officer regained control and steered the ship at high speed towards the target. *Campbeltown* rammed the caisson at 0134 hours, just four minutes behind schedule. The first 36 feet of the bows were

**Above:** No. 50 Middle East Commando makes an amphibious landing on Crete, where it suffered heavy casualties following the German airborne invasion of the island. At this time, the title of Commando was dropped for security reasons and the unit was known as D Battalion. *CMC*

compressed by the force of the impact and the ship was well and truly lodged. In any case the crew next scuttled the ship to prevent the Germans from ever possibly pulling it free before the hidden explosives in the hull were detonated. The demolition teams scrambled over the sides and onto the docks. They were met with fierce firing as they sprinted to their targets. Most of the motor launches had been shot to pieces during the approach and fewer than 100 Commandos ever got ashore. They faced some 5,000 German defenders in the local area, many armed with heavy weapons.

While the assault parties attacked the numerous gun emplacements, the demolition teams rushed to the buildings housing the vital machinery of the Normandie Dock. With great skill and determination, they placed their charges with precision and set the fuses for detonation. After this had been successfully achieved, the Commandos withdrew to the rendezvous point on the Old Mole where Lt-Col Newman had established his command post. There they awaited the motor launches for re-embarkation. Tragically, few of these had survived the battle; most had been blown apart by shellfire or were now burning fiercely with their crews incinerated. Nevertheless, Ryder's *MGB 314* and the few remaining launches limped back to sea with as many Commandos as they could carry. Those left stranded ashore decided to break out of the town and there followed what the Commandos called 'The St Nazaire Steeplechase' as they jumped over innumerable garden fences and other obstacles in their efforts to escape. Most fell into enemy hands but five Commandos did evade capture and made it home via Spain and Gibraltar.

Out at sea, the surviving vessels headed for home, but they were not out of danger yet. Five *Möwe* Class frigates of the type that HMS *Campbeltown* had been modified to resemble were at sea that night. As dawn was breaking, one of them, the *Jaguar*, encountered *ML 306*, commanded by Lt I.B. Henderson. With him were 13 sailors and 14 Commandos including Sgt Tom Durrant of No. 1 Commando. The *Jaguar* opened fire on the hapless motor launch but the Commandos promptly returned fire with their personal weapons against the powerful adversary. Within a short time 20 of the British were dead or wounded. The German frigate stopped firing and demanded Lt Henderson that he surrender his command. Henderson declined and firing resumed with Sgt Durrant manning a twin Lewis gun mounting at the stern of the craft. Although repeatedly wounded, he continued to engage the enemy until he was killed. The unequal contest had lasted for an hour when the *Jaguar* once more came alongside the sinking launch. Only one man, Lt Swayne of No. 1 Commando, remained unwounded on board *ML 306*. He rose unsteadily to his feet and called out, apologetically, 'I'm afraid we can't go on.' The captain of the *Jaguar* was so impressed by the action of the Commandos, particularly by Sgt Durrant manning the twin Lewis machine guns, that he later sought out Lt-Col Newman in a prison camp and told him: 'You may wish to recommend this man for a high decoration.' Sgt Tom Durrant was subsequently posthumously awarded the Victoria

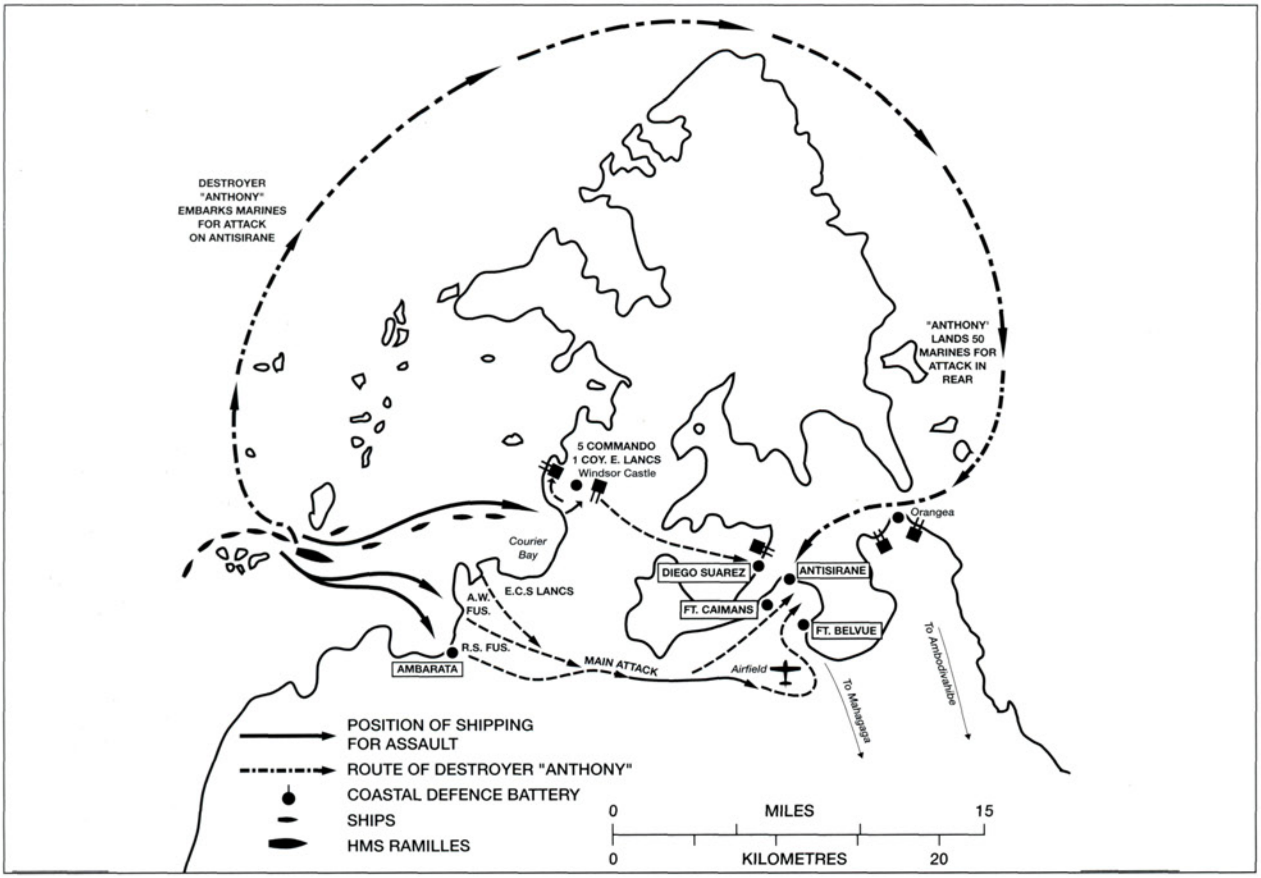
Cross, the first time that a VC had been awarded to a soldier for a naval action on the recommendation of an enemy officer.

A further four VCs were awarded for exceptional acts of valour in the raid on St Nazaire: to the captain of HMS *Campbeltown*, Lt-Cdr Samuel Beattie, RN; to the naval commander, Capt Robert Ryder, RN; posthumously to Able Seaman William Savage; and the other Commando VC to Lt-Col Charles Newman. Of the 19 naval craft that entered the Loire estuary, only four returned. Some 169 men were killed and another 200 were taken prisoner. Only 270 of the 630 men who set out on the raid returned home safely. On the following day, 29 March 1942, the delayed action charges on board HMS Campbeltown exploded, killing a great number of Germans and incapacitating the dry dock for the remainder of the war. For the Commandos St Nazaire was and remains 'the greatest raid of all'.

## MADAGASCAR AND THE STORMING OF DIEGO SUAREZ

Despite the heavy losses, Operation Chariot was deemed a great success and a full vindication of the Commando concept. Both Churchill and Mountbatten were anxious to extend Commando operations far and wide. After the disastrous fall of Singapore and the sinking of the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*, the Prime Minister was keen to find an alternative naval base in the Indian Ocean and suggested seizing the island of Madagascar from the Vichy French. This would also serve to protect the extended sea-lanes from Britain to the Middle East. After several months of planning, a task force set sail on the 9,000-mile journey on 23 March 1942. Operation

Below: The storming of Diego Suarez.


DESTROYER "ANTHONY" EMBARKS MARINES FOR ATTACK ON ANTISIRANE
"ANTHONY" LANDS 50 MARINES FOR ATTACK IN REAR
5 COMMANDO
1 COY. E. LANCS
Windsor Castle
Orangea
Courier Bay
DIEGO SUAREZ
ANTISIRANE
E.C.S LANCS
A.W. FUS.
FT. CAIMANS
FT. BELVUE
R.S. FUS.
AMBARATA
MAIN ATTACK
Airfield
To Mahagaga
To Ambodivahibe
POSITION OF SHIPPING FOR ASSAULT
ROUTE OF DESTROYER "ANTHONY"
COASTAL DEFENCE BATTERY
SHIPS
HMS RAMILLES
0
MILES
15
0
KILOMETRES
20

Ironclad was mounted against the port of Diego Suarez on the northern tip of the island on 5 May with No. 5 Commando leading the assault in conjunction with 29 Infantry Brigade. The Commandos' task was to eliminate two coastal artillery batteries which dominated the landing beaches. At 0430 hours, the 365 men of No. 5 Commando and a company of the East Lancashire Regiment landed from LCAs at Courrier Bay some 11 miles north of Diego Suarez. The raiders climbed the cliffs and caught the Vichy gunners fast asleep. However, at first light, French colonial troops mounted a counter-attack. The Commandos responded with a bayonet charge that killed the French NCOs and the rest promptly surrendered.

The Commandos then began the long march in sweltering heat towards Diego Suarez. En route they encountered a force of French Foreign Legionnaires and, in the words of Geoffrey Riley of No. 5 Commando: 'We shot them up a bit before they surrendered and there were about 50 wounded. We carried out mopping-up operations against colonial troops while the two infantry brigades took the town of Antsirane with heavy casualties.' The attack on the town, which lies across the water from Diego Suarez, had faltered. In the words of the Land Force commander, Maj-Gen Robert Sturges: 'Every Frenchman who can hold a rifle appears to be defending the neck of land on the Antsirane peninsula.' He called for a diversionary attack by a Royal Marine landing party from the battleship

**Right:** Another view of members of No. 50 Middle East Commando at Kabrit on the shores of the Great Bitter Lake in August 1940 – a graphic example of the pitiful state of equipment for the Commandos in the early months of their existence. *CMC*

### No. 10 (INTER-ALLIED) COMMANDO

As it name implied, No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando was composed of volunteers from many countries of occupied Europe. It was formed on 11 July 1942. All its personnel were highly motivated and it fought in every theatre of war with considerable success. Under British command, each troop had an authorised strength of four officers and 83 other ranks.

British Headquarters
No. 1 (French) Troop
No. 2 (Dutch) Troop
No. 3 or X Troop – this troop was made up of personnel from Eastern Europe including some Germans.
The Belgian Troop HQ
No. 4 (Belgian) Troop
No. 5 (Norwegian) Troop
No. 6 (Polish) Troop
No. 7 (Yugoslav) Troop
No. 8 (French) Troop
No. 9 (Belgian) Troop
No. 10 (Belgian) Troop

HMS *Ramillies* on the night of 6 May. Under the command of Capt Martin Price, the 50 Marines boarded the destroyer HMS *Antony* and sailed round the northern tip of Madagascar (see map on page 35) and approached the quayside at Antsirane in pitch darkness under heavy fire from shore batteries. The Marines leapt ashore under heavy machine-gun fire. Their task was to cause disruption in the dockyard but not to attack the barracks or the main magazine, which were believed to be heavily defended by Vichy French troops. In the event, the Royal Marines overran the whole town in short order at the cost of just one casualty. In the words of the official after-action report: 'These fifty Royal Marines created a disturbance out of all proportion to their numbers.' It was a classic 'cutting-out' operation in the long tradition of the Royal Marines in their assaults from the sea.

To many, the Royal Marines had been undertaking the actual role of the Commandos for hundreds of years. However, there was considerable opposition from the Corps of Royal Marines to the notion of fighting on land. The higher echelons of the Corps maintained that naval gunnery was the prime purpose of the Royal Marines and not amphibious operations. However, it was recognised that such a role was necessary in the current war and a Royal Marine Brigade had been formed in January 1940. It was too late to see action in the Norwegian campaign but it was despatched on the abortive

## NO. 62 COMMANDO – SMALL SCALE RAIDING FORCE

At the personal instigation of the commander of Combined Operations, Vice-Admiral Mountbatten, the Small Scale Raiding Force was formed early in 1942 for clandestine operations along the coastline of occupied Europe in co-operation with the Special Operations Executive (SOE). It was given the cover name of No. 62 Commando. Originally formed by Capt Gus March-Phillipps and Lt Geoffrey Appleyard from members of B Troop of No. 7 Commando, this unit was also known as the Maid Honor Force from the name of the fishing trawler it used for raiding. It gained notoriety for attacking Italian and German shipping in the neutral Portuguese colonial port of Fernando Po in the Gulf of Guinea during Operation Postmaster in January 1942. On its return to England, the SSRF conducted cross-Channel raids using a specially modified motor torpedo boat, *MTB 344*, which was known as 'The Little Pisser'. In September 1942 the SSRF conducted three raids. A typical one was Operation Dryad on 2/3 September when *MTB 344* landed troops that attacked the lighthouse on Les Casquets north of the Channel Islands. Radios, code books and prisoners were captured and the raiders returned without any casualties.

The SSRF and men of No. 12 Commando mounted a subsequent raid against the Channel Island of Sark on the night of 3/4 October as Operation Basalt. The force included some fabled Commando raiders such as Capt Philip Pinckney and the 'Fighting Dane', Lt Anders Lassen. In the attack on Dixcart Hotel, several prisoners were taken and tied up with Commando toggle ropes. As the raiders withdrew, four prisoners were shot dead and the Germans subsequently found their bound bodies. This incident led to Hitler's order that all Commando raiders be executed on capture. In the spring of 1943, the SSRF was disbanded and its personnel transferred either to No. 12 Commando or the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPP). The role of the COPP was beach reconnaissance prior to a raid or assault landing using two-man canoes. With the canoe or 'cockle' standing offshore, one of the crewmen swam to the beach to determine essential data such as gradients and ground composition. COPPs were first employed during Operation Torch and were a part of virtually every subsequent assault and major river crossing of the war.

**Above right:** MTB 344 was used extensively by the Small Scale Raiding Force for its clandestine raids against occupied France and for inserting SOE agents. *CMC*

**Below right:** With the barrels of a twin Lewis machine gun pointing skywards, the bridge of MTB 344 shows the Fairbairn-Sykes symbols to denote the number of Commando raids undertaken and swastikas to represent two E-boats sunk in action. *CMC*

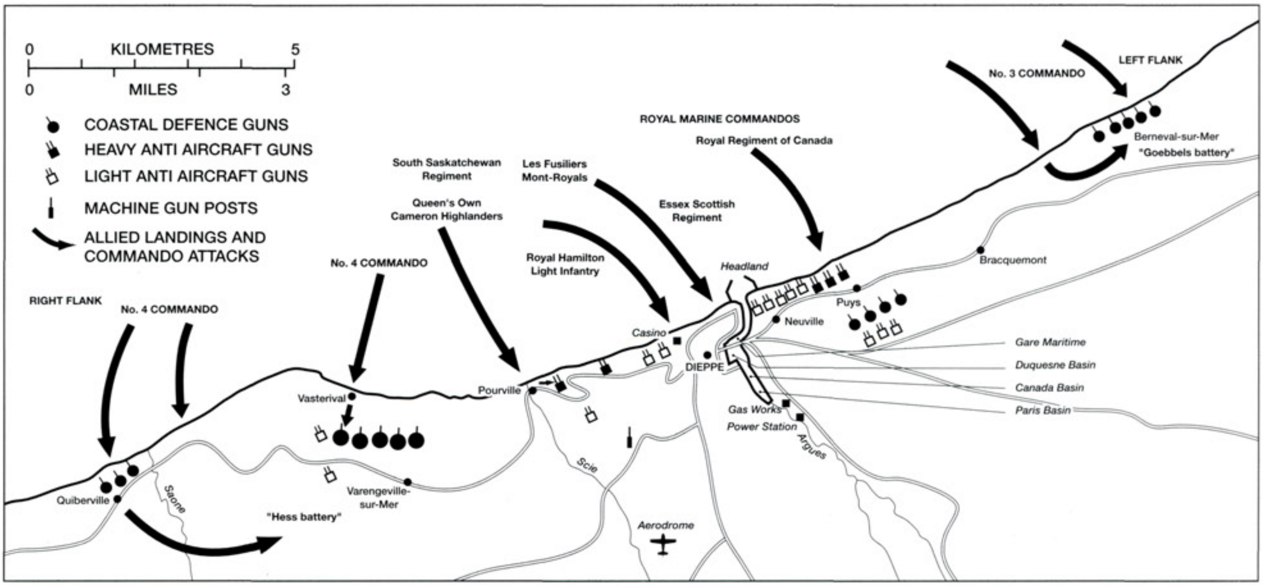
expedition to Dakar in West Africa in August 1940. In the same month, it was decided to expand the formation into a Royal Marine Division. This was achieved by 1941 but it spent most of the year languishing in Scotland and Wales waiting for an operational role. When the War Office blocked the formation of any more Army Commando units, Mountbatten cast his eyes around for more men to enlarge his Combined Operations command. They fell on the Royal Marines. The Admiralty agreed to the raising of a Royal Marine Commando with volunteers from the RM Division. Under the command of Lt-Col Joseph Picton Phillipps, the Royal Marine Commando was formed at Deal in Kent on 14 February 1942. It was soon to see action in the largest Combined Operations amphibious assault of the war so far.

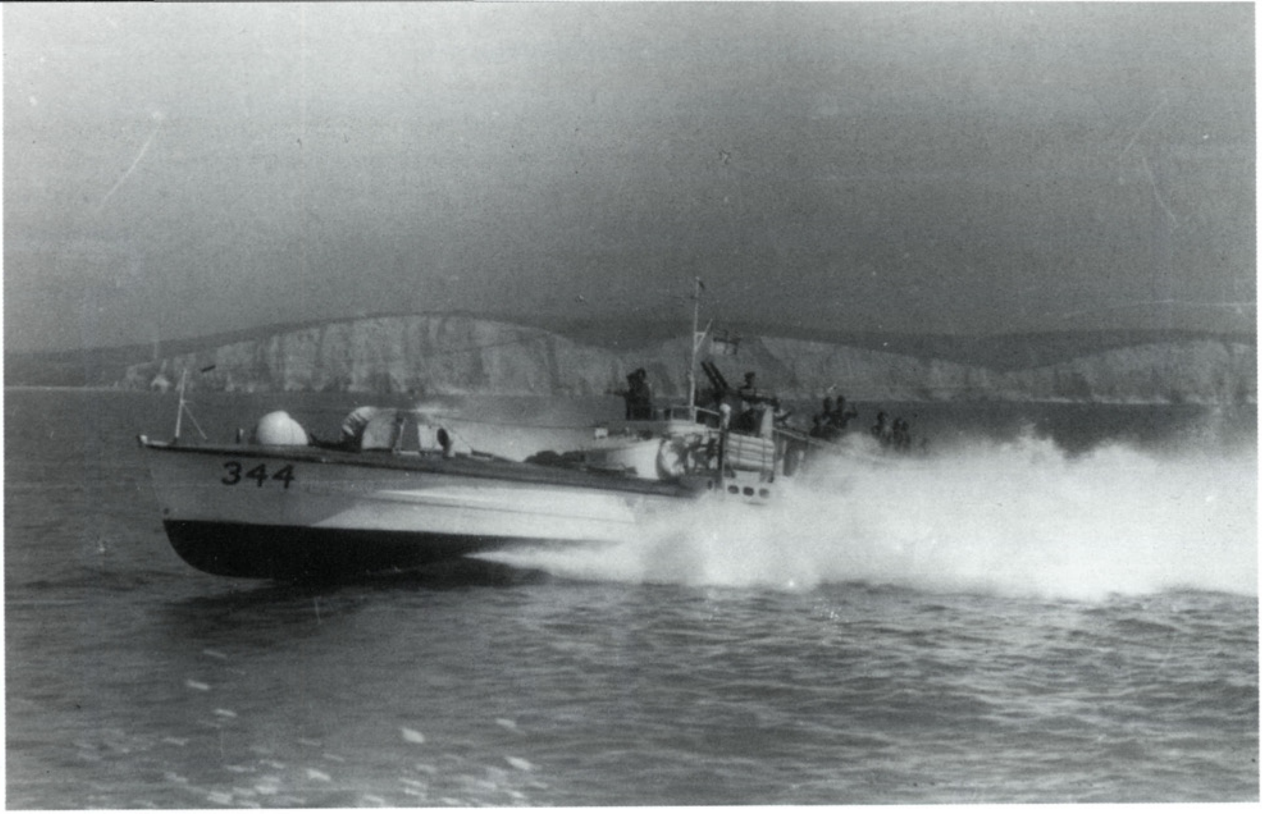
## OPERATION JUBILEE – THE DISASTER AT DIEPPE

By the summer of 1942 the Nazis were at the height of their conquests. The Third Reich stretched from the Pyrenees in the west to the Urals in the east and still the Panzers plunged deeper into the Soviet Union towards the oilfields of the Black and Caspian Seas. From Norway in the Arctic to the Egyptian desert on the Mediterranean, Hitler's armies occupied most of Europe and much territory beyond. To the British, the last six months of the war had brought a string of crushing defeats culminating in the largest surrender of British forces in the history of the British Empire at Singapore. For Winston Churchill, it was one of the darkest times of the war. He came under intense pressure from Stalin to mount a diversionary attack in Western Europe to divert German manpower away from the Eastern Front. President Roosevelt was also keen to open a 'Second Front' as soon as possible under the codename Operation Sledgehammer.

Anxious to build on the earlier Commando successes, Admiral Mountbatten and other Allied leaders decided to mount a much larger raid against another French port with the aim of capturing the town for some 12 hours as a rehearsal for the invasion of mainland Europe at a later date. It was a risky enterprise against an entrenched enemy in strongly fortified positions. The port chosen for the raid was Dieppe as it was within range of RAF fighters which would need to provide air cover. Neither the Royal Navy nor the RAF was willing to provide major warships or heavy bombers to support the landings or destroy the gun emplacements on the headlands that covered every approach to Dieppe. It was

**Below:** The disaster at Dieppe – lessons learned from this action delayed D-Day by at least a year because it made obvious the fact that landings would have to be made on beaches rather than a defended port. Dieppe also made the German defenders overconfident in the strength of their Atlantic Wall.


0 KILOMETRES 5
0 MILES 3
COASTAL DEFENCE GUNS
HEAVY ANTI AIRCRAFT GUNS
LIGHT ANTI AIRCRAFT GUNS
MACHINE GUN POSTS
ALLIED LANDINGS AND COMMANDO ATTACKS
RIGHT FLANK
No. 4 COMMANDO
No. 4 COMMANDO
Quiberville
Saone
"Hess battery"
Vasterival
Varengeville-sur-Mer
South Saskatchewan Regiment
Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders
Les Fusiliers Mont-Royals
Pourville
Scie
Royal Hamilton Light Infantry
Essex Scottish Regiment
Casino
ROYAL MARINE COMMANDOS
Royal Regiment of Canada
Headland
DIEPPE
Aerodrome
Gas Works
Power Station
Argues
Neuville
Puys
Gare Maritime
Duquesne Basin
Canada Basin
Paris Basin
Bracquemont
No. 3 COMMANDO
LEFT FLANK
Berneval-sur-Mer
"Goebbels battery"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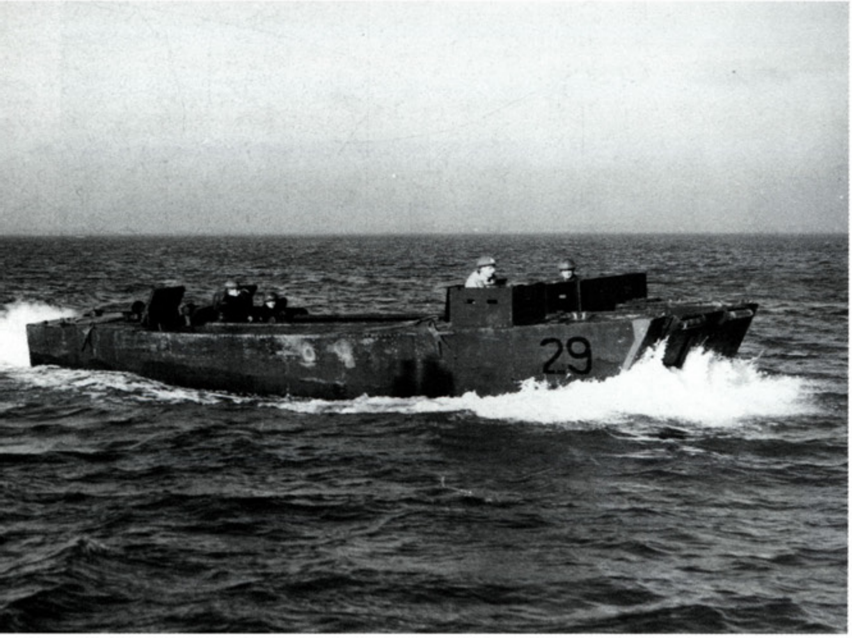
a task well suited to airborne assault by paratroopers or gliders, as the Germans had proved so effectively in the capture of the massive Belgian fortress of Eben Emael in 1940. But Mountbatten vetoed any airborne attack and substituted a Commando seaborne assault to go in some 30 minutes before the main landings by conventional Army troops. The mission was passed to detachments from Nos. 3 and 4 Commandos together with No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando and a small party of United States Rangers. The newly formed Royal Marine Commando was given the task of seizing any coastal craft and barges inside Dieppe harbour and sailing them back to England. (The RM Commando subsequently became A Battalion when the formation doubled in size in October 1942 before it became No. 40 RM Commando; a title it retains to this day. Sixty years on, No. 40 RM Commando led the British assault by 3 Commando Brigade against the Al Faw peninsula during Operation Telic/Iraqi Freedom in March 2003.)

While British Empire troops from Australia, India, New Zealand and Africa were fighting side by side with the British in the Western Desert, over 200,000 Canadian soldiers were now present in Britain undergoing military training. Although keen volunteers, the Canadians were woefully inexperienced and had rarely trained at any unit size greater than battalion strength. However, the Canadian 2nd Division of some 6,000 men was chosen for the raid, together with the more experienced British troops of Nos. 3 and 4 Commandos. Originally codenamed Operation Rutter, the raid was repeatedly postponed and some troops did trial landings along the south coast as many as half a dozen times, which did little to maintain security. It was further compromised as the Canadian troops were being embarked onto landing craft when three hit-and-run Focke-Wulf FW190 fighter-bombers swept down and strafed some ships causing several casualties. The decision was taken to cancel the operation and many in the High Command breathed a sigh of relief.

On 19 June Britain suffered a further defeat when the isolated town of Tobruk surrendered to the Afrika Korps after a short siege. Having resisted Rommel's Panzers in the previous year, Churchill had great hopes that the garrison would repeat the feat of arms but to no avail and he was plunged into deep depression. Under further pressure from Roosevelt and Stalin to create a Second Front in Europe, Churchill reluctantly agreed to resurrect the Dieppe raid. Now codenamed Operation Jubilee, the plan was brutally simple, with Canadian infantry, supported by 28 new Churchill infantry tanks, attacking frontally across the beach. Further landings on the headlands overlooking the town were to be mounted to guard the flanks, while the two Commando forces were to destroy enemy gun emplacements further up the coastline codenamed 'Goebbels' and 'Hess'. In total the raiding force numbered some 6,100 men including 50 US Rangers; the first Americans to see action in the European Theatre of Operations.

In the early morning darkness of 19 August 1942, the 250-strong fleet of landing craft and warships congregated near the Isle of Wight and steamed towards occupied France. At 0347 hours, it was spotted by a German convoy and one of the German escorts fired starshells that exposed the amphibious force and alerted the

**Below:** The first Royal Marine Commando unit was formed in February 1942 and it fought at Dieppe during Operation Jubilee. Here, Royal Marines undergo training in their LCA. *CEC*



**Above:** Due to a chance naval encounter with German warships in the Channel, only five of the 20 landing craft carrying No. 3 Commando to Dieppe reached their designated beaches. Eighteen men of No. 6 Troop under the command of Maj Peter Young were able to land at Yellow Beach 2 below the cliffs of Berneval and neutralise the Goebbels battery on the left flank of the Dieppe landings. Here, LCAs circle offshore as the Commando raid takes place against the gun batteries dominating the beaches of Dieppe. Accompanying the raid were 50 US Rangers in their first ever action and the French Troop of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando. *WFC*

coastal batteries. In the ensuing mêlée, the two German escorts were sunk but the landing craft were scattered and many failed to regain formation, including some belonging to No. 3 Commando. As the remainder approached the shoreline, they were illuminated by searchlights and engaged by gunfire. The situation was already hopeless but the Canadians pressed on regardless. As their landing craft grounded on the pebble beach, the German machine guns cut loose with awful precision. The initial casualties were so terrible that the open ramps became clogged with the dead and injured and the following troops had to climb over their fallen comrades into the surf to reach the beach.

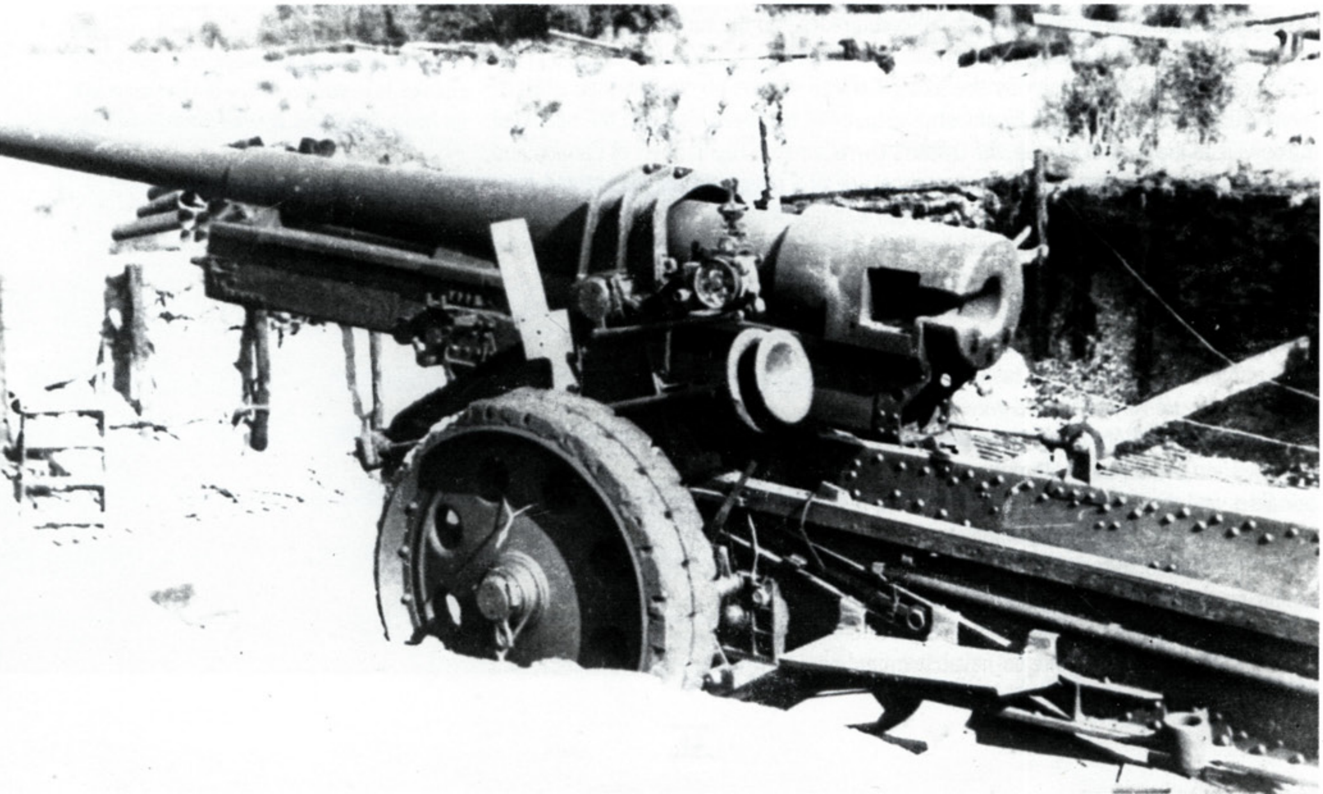
The infantry of proud Canadian regiments which had won many battle honours in the Great War were now cut down by the score; German snipers eliminated their officers, senior NCOs and signallers one by one until virtually all had been killed. At the headland of Pourville to the west of Dieppe, the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada and the South Saskatchewans landed on the wrong side of a river from the village and guns which were their target. Every attempt to cross was met with murderous fire and within a few hours both regiments were rendered ineffective with less than 350 men being evacuated; 144 were killed and 541 captured.

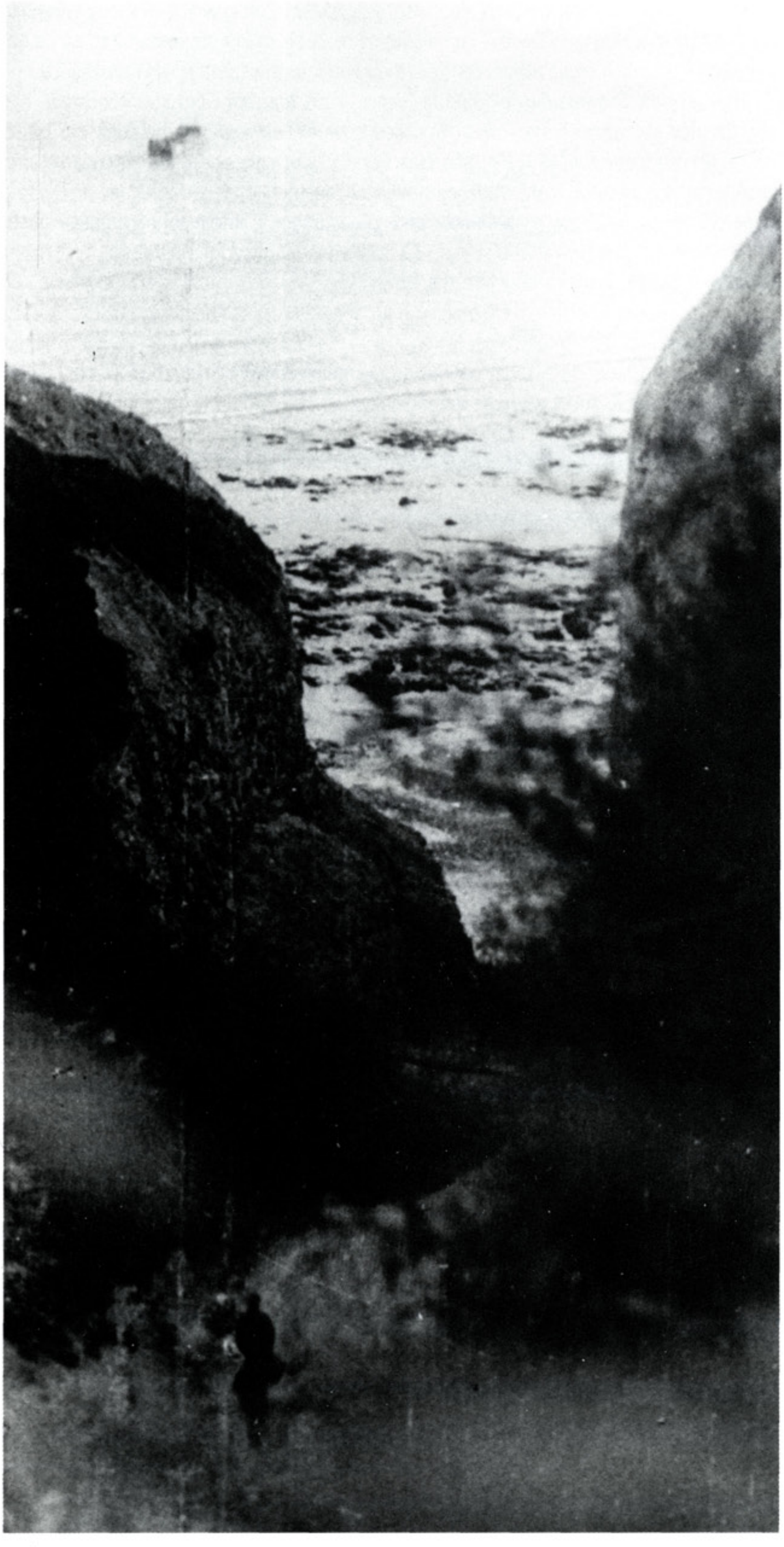
On the other headland to the east of Dieppe at the village of Puys, the situation was equally dire. At 0500, the Royal Regiment of Canada had scrambled ashore into the teeth of murderous fire with its task made more difficult by the steepness of the pebble beach and the density of barbed wire entanglements. Few were able to get clear of the beach and those caught along its length were fired on from the nearby cliff tops, which remained in German hands throughout. By 0830 the regiment had suffered over 300 casualties and the survivors surrendered. In all, the Royals lost 209 men dead and 100 wounded, of whom 20 died subsequently in captivity, plus 262 prisoners of war.

With both headlands still held by the enemy, the troops on the Dieppe beaches were caught on three sides under German guns. Despite this, the main assault force of the Essex, Scottish and the Royal Hamilton Light infantry splashed ashore with remarkably few casualties following a fierce naval bombardment of the shoreline and repeated

strafing by Hurricane fighters. As they reached the seawall their progress was checked. Before them was an open grass esplanade and all attempting to cross it were cut down time and again. Following the infantry came the heavy Churchill tanks of the Calgary Regiment; 27 out of a total of 29 committed landed safely but they were met by the concentrated fire of German large calibre weapons. Others were unable to negotiate the steep sloping beach as their tracks thrashed helplessly in the shingle. Even so 15 tanks managed to mount the seawall onto the esplanade but anti-tank obstacles blocking every street into the town halted any further progress. Trapped on the promenade, they fought on, their tracks dripping with blood from the dead and injured that were crushed as they manoeuvred about, until their ammunition was exhausted, whereupon the crews were forced to surrender. Only one crewman from the tanks landed at Dieppe returned to England.

For the infantry, there was no respite and the slaughter continued unabated. Some Canadians managed to break into the fortified buildings, mostly hotels, that overlooked the beaches, but the Germans remained firmly in control. Their machine guns and mortars continued to dominate every approach. By now, even the gallant Canadians were becoming disheartened. More and more began surrendering to the Germans. At sea, the force commander, Major-General J.H. Roberts, had little idea of events on the beaches as most signallers were dead and the shoreline was obscured by smoke. At 0700 he committed his reserves including the French-Canadian Mont-Royal Fusiliers and the Royal Marine Commando. Few of the Fusiliers ever made it ashore as their landing craft were blown apart by accurate gunfire; the majority were massacred. Colonel Phillipps did not demur when his Royal Marines were ordered into the attack and, as the official after-action report stated: ‘With a courage terrible to see, the Marines went in to land determined, if fortune so wished, to repeat at Dieppe what their fathers had accomplished at Zeebrugge.’ But as they approached the shore, Phillipps realised the hopelessness of the situation. Wearing his characteristic white gloves so that his Marines could recognise him in battle, he leapt onto the raised decking of his landing craft and signalled for the others to turn about. One by one they acknowledged his hand





**Left:** At Dieppe both Nos. 3 and 4 Commandos had to attack up the steep chalk cliffs through narrow defiles choked with barbed wire to reach their objectives. Nevertheless, both attacks were successful against the Goebbels and Hess gun batteries. *WFC*

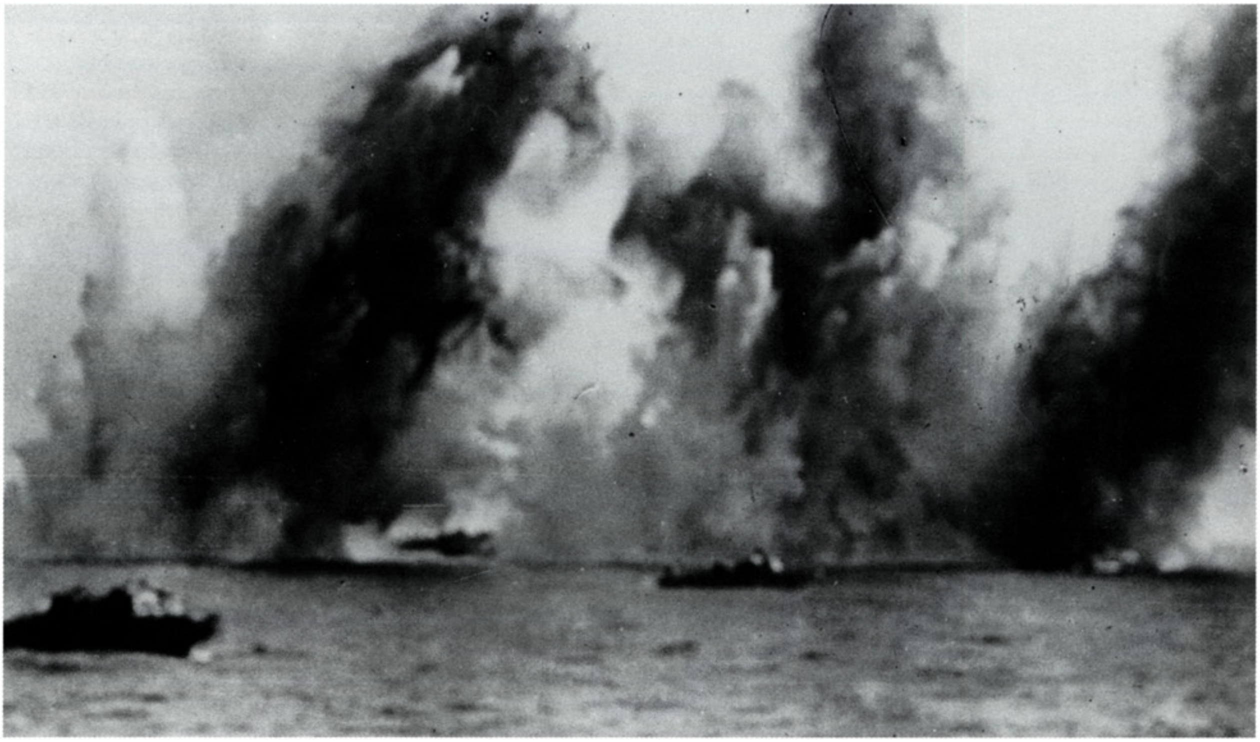
**Opposite, Above:** During Operation Cauldron, Capt (acting Maj) Pat Porteus displayed great gallantry and was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross for which the citation stated: 'Maj Porteus was shot at close range through the hand, the bullet passing through his palm and entering his upper arm. Undaunted, Major Porteus closed with his assailant, succeeded in disarming him and killed him with his own bayonet thereby saving the life of a British Sergeant on whom the German had turned his aim.' As the final attack of No. 4 Commando went in, Maj Porteus was in the van, as the citation described: '… the larger detachment was held up, and the officer leading this detachment was killed. Major Porteus, without hesitation and in the face of a withering fire, dashed across the open ground to take over command of this detachment. Rallying them, he led them in a charge which carried the German position at the point of a bayonet, and was seriously wounded a second time. Though shot through the thigh he continued to the final objective where he eventually collapsed from loss of blood after the last of the guns had been destroyed.' After recovering from his wounds, Porteus fought with the Small Scale Raiding Force. *IWM – HU2018*

**Opposite, Below:** The attack by No. 4 Commando against the Hess gun battery was codenamed Operation Cauldron. The Commandos were divided into two teams with 88 men in Group 1 under Lt-Col the Lord Lovat and 164 in Group 2 under Maj Derek Mills-Roberts. While the latter engaged the battery with fire, Group 1 outflanked the position and took it from the rear in a well co-ordinated manoeuvre. The six 155mm howitzers of Hess battery were destroyed by demolition charges. *WFC* signals, but the German gunners had also seen them. Phillipps fell mortally wounded when hit by machine-gun fire but he had saved most his men from almost certain death. Despite his sacrifice some others continued onwards to the carnage of White Beach.

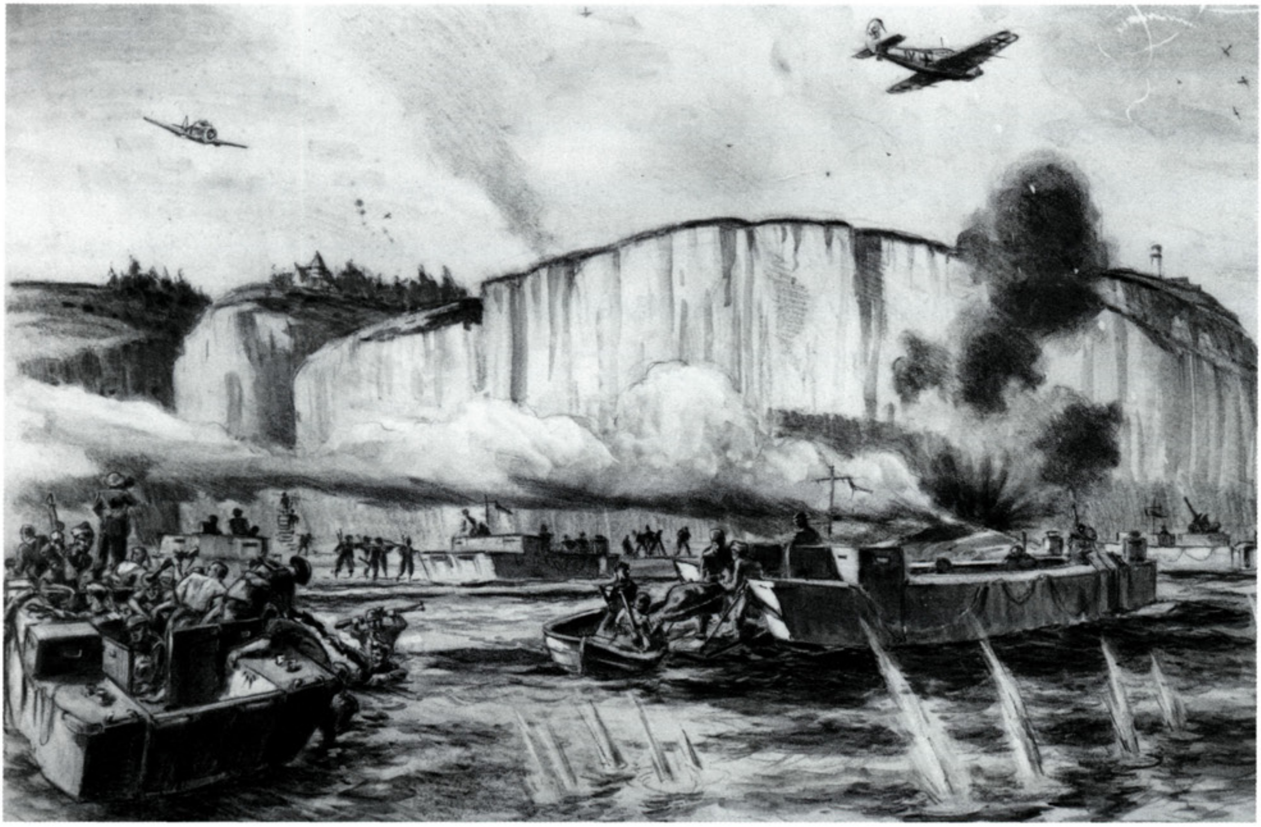
The German Commander-in-Chief in France, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, had also decided to commit his reserves. He called forward two powerful divisions, the 1st SS Panzer 'Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler' and 10th Panzer, which were recuperating nearby after service on the Eastern Front. As they advanced on the trapped Canadians in Dieppe, General Roberts and the amphibious force commander, Captain John Hughes-Hallett, RN, decided on withdrawal. The signal: 'Vanquish', meaning evacuation, was sent to the embattled troops. Under heavy fire, the Royal Navy was only able to recover some 300 survivors from the beaches of Dieppe. At Pourville and Puys, others were able to escape but the casualties were high.

Only the Commando attacks on the gun emplacements of Hess and Goebbels had been in the least successful. At Varengeville-sur-Mer, No. 4 Commando under the command of Lt-Col the Lord Lovat destroyed the Hess Battery of six 150mm guns and killed approximately 150 Germans at a cost of 12 dead and 20 wounded. On the other flank, the assault by No. 3 Commando was struck with disaster at the outset when six of its landing craft, including the one carrying its commanding officer, Lt-Col Durnford-Slater, were lost in the initial encounter with the German convoy in the Channel. A much depleted force of just 19 Commandos under the command of Major Peter Young, one of the most decorated Commando soldiers of the war, landed on a fire-swept beach and climbed the cliffs beneath the Goebbels Battery. Under constant fire, the Commandos advanced on the position killing its crew but the guns remained intact. Short of ammunition, Major Young withdrew his men to the beach from where they were evacuated.

The raid on Dieppe had been a disaster. The losses were grievous. In less than 12 hours, the Army sustained 3,367 casualties, mainly Canadian, with 1,027 dead and



**Below:** Under the devastating fire of German coastal artillery, the landing craft carrying Canadian troops approach the beaches of Dieppe where the attackers were cut down by the score. Whereas the overall Allied losses during the Dieppe raid were approximately 60 per cent, the Commandos suffered a casualty rate of 23 per cent and the 50 men of 1st US Ranger Battalion 26 per cent. *Canadian National Archives*



Above: A graphic drawing by Cpl Brian Mullen depicts the withdrawal of No. 4 Commando after the successful attack on Hess battery. With the LCAs under fire from German fighter planes, No. 18 smoke generators create a smokescreen to mask the withdrawal. Of the 252 men of No. 4 Commando in Operation Cauldron, 12 were killed, 20 wounded and 13 missing in action. *CMC*

2,340 captured. Among the dead was the first American soldier to be killed in action in Europe, Lieutenant Edwin Lousalot of the 1st US Rangers. The Canadians lost more prisoners of war in one day than they did in the whole of the campaign in North-West Europe in 1944–45. The Royal Navy lost one destroyer and numerous landing craft as well as 550 casualties; the Royal Air Force lost 106 aircraft and 53 aircrew. All the tanks and equipment that had been landed were abandoned. German losses were approximately 600 men. At 1740 Field Marshal Rundstedt noted in his war diary, 'No armed Englishman remains on the Continent', ignoring the fact that the majority of the raiders had been Canadian.

Many lessons were learned on that day but the price had been awfully high. On the one hand Admiral Mountbatten claimed: 'The Duke of Wellington said the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. I say that the battle of Normandy was won on the beaches of Dieppe. For every man that died at Dieppe ten would live on D-Day.' One of the Royal Marines that did land at Dieppe and saw the carnage for himself described the battle as: 'the biggest cock-up since the Somme'. His opinion is arguably nearer the truth but nothing should detract from the courage and sacrifice of the Canadian Army. Writing after the war, Churchill stated: 'Dieppe occupies a place of its own in the story of war and the grim casualty figures must not class it as a failure... honour to the brave that fell. Their sacrifice was not in vain.' Twenty-two months later, the Allies returned to France – Americans, British and Canadians as well as Commandos just like at Dieppe – but this time they attacked over the open beaches of Normandy and brought their own harbours with them – an idea conceived by Capt Hughes-Hallett as he sailed back to England from the Dieppe disaster.

## 1943 COMMANDO ORDER OF BATTLE

Each Commando had a complement of 460 all ranks. The order of battle was:

HQ and Sig Troop
5 x Troops, each of 2 x Sections (HQ of three; 2 x subsections of 14 men)
1 x Heavy Weapon Troop (with 1 x Med MG Section and 1 x 3-inch mortar Section)

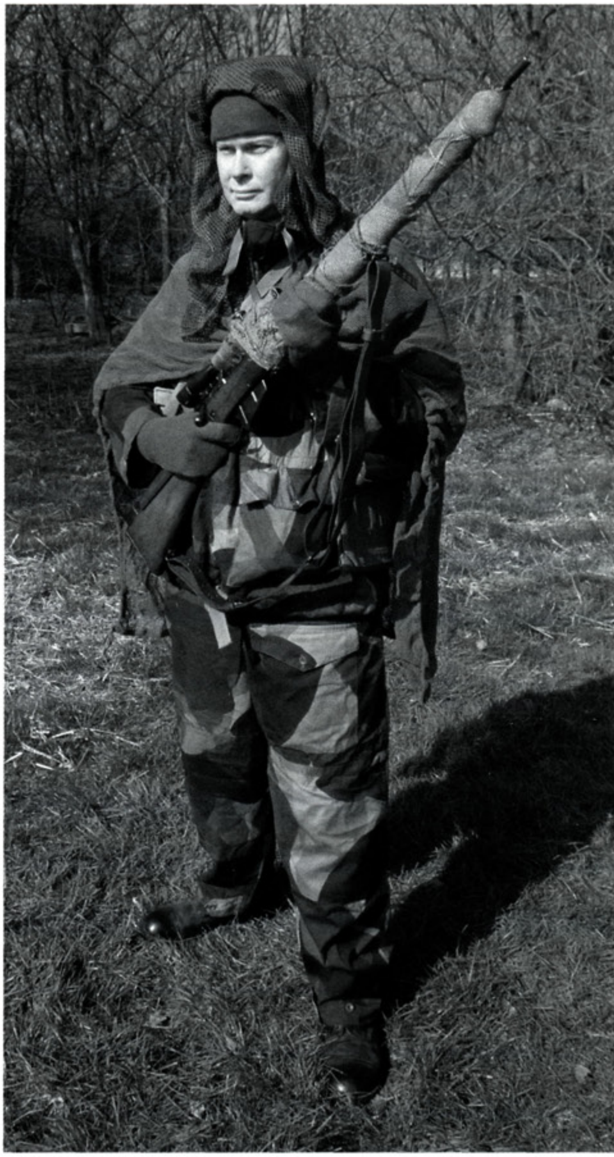
## *KOMMANDOBEFEHL*

Despite the failure of Operation Jubilee, the Germans felt obliged to bolster their defences in Western Europe. They began the construction of massive coastal fortifications to create the 'Atlantic Wall' of *Festung Europa*. Weapons and manpower were diverted from the fighting fronts so the objective of relieving the pressure on the Russians was partially achieved thanks to the raid on Dieppe. Furthermore, the Commando raids were proving extremely irksome to the German High Command and Hitler in particular. Among the detritus the Germans discovered on the beaches of Dieppe were the Battle Orders of the 6 Brigade commander that contained the chilling phrase: 'Tie the hands of all POWs'; this was notionally to stop prisoners from destroying sensitive documents. This directive was in direct contravention of the Geneva Conventions. In addition, the Germans found the bodies of 12 of their soldiers who had been bound and trussed.

Hitler was outraged. He was further incensed following an attack by the Small Scale Raiding Force (SSRF) and men of No. 12 Commando on the night of 3/4 October against the island of Sark. A German command post in the Dixcart Hotel was ransacked and five Germans taken as POWs. Their hands were tied and they were led to the beach for transport to England but four of them were killed in unexplained circumstances and their bodies left behind. Hitler then issued his infamous *Kommandobefehl* or 'Commando Order' which went as follows.

> 'For some time now our enemies have been using methods in their prosecution of the war which are outside the agreements of the Geneva Convention. Especially brutal and vicious are the members of the so-called Commandos, which have been recruited, as has been ascertained to a certain extent, even from released criminals in enemy countries. Captured orders show that they have not only been instructed to tie up prisoners, but also to kill them should they become a burden to them. At last orders have been found in which the killing of prisoners is demanded.
>
> For this reason… Germany will in future use the same methods against these sabotage groups of the British, that is they will be ruthlessly exterminated wherever German troops may find them.
>
> I therefore order: that from now on all enemy troops who are met by German troops while on so-called Commando raids, even if they are soldiers in uniform, are to be destroyed to the last man, either in battle or while fleeing.
>
> This order does not affect the treatment of enemy soldiers taken prisoner during normal battle actions (major attack, major seaborne or airborne landings). It also does not affect prisoners taken at sea or flyers who saved themselves by parachute and were taken prisoner.
>
> I shall have all commanders and officers who do not comply with this order court-martialled.'

However, Gen Jodl, one of Hitler's principal staff officers, realising this order was tantamount to a war crime, appended a note saying: 'This order is intended for senior commanders only and is on no account to fall into enemy hands.' The first victims of the notorious *Kommandobefehl* were not long in coming.



Above: Commando snipers were issued with a camouflaged version of the windproof smock and trousers and a customised version of the No. 4 rifle.

Left: The Commandos had a higher complement of snipers than standard units and they were employed extensively to harass the enemy in both offensive and defensive operations. This sniper adopts a heroic pose with his head covered with a camouflage face veil. He is wearing a paratrooper's Denison smock and is armed with a Rifle No. 4 Mark 1* (T), No. 36 grenades and a Webley revolver. *CEC*

**Right:** Operation 'Frankton'.

# OPERATION FRANKTON – THE COCKLESHELL HEROES

While the scale of Commando operations had grown during 1942, there were also several classic hit-and-run attacks undertaken by small bands of raiders; a plethora of new and ever more specialised Special Forces units were being created such as the SSRF and the COPP. One of these units, which was to win lasting fame, went under the splendid euphemistic designation of the Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment, soon to be known as the Cockleshell Heroes from the type of canoe they used for their sabotage missions. The most famous of these was against shipping in the French port of Bordeaux. The Germans had occupied the city in June 1940 and it had become an important conduit for raw materials from around the world that were vital to the Nazi war effort. Ships that formerly had to run the British blockade to reach ports in Germany were now unloaded in well-protected French harbours and their cargoes transported to Germany by the safer methods of road or rail. In particular, vital supplies of rubber, oil, tin and other scarce metals were arriving at ports in southwest France in such significant quantities that the British Minister for Economic Warfare, Lord Selbourne, wrote to the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, suggesting the flow be stemmed. During the previous 12 months over 25,000 tons of rubber had been landed in France: rubber was one of the few items that German industry had been unable to create satisfactorily in ersatz form at an economical rate.

Bombing of these ports by the Royal Air Force was deemed to be too inaccurate and would have resulted in unacceptable French civilian casualties. Bombardment from the Bay of Biscay by the Royal Navy was an option. Such a means had been shown to be effective in the destruction of the French fleet at Mers el Kebir in Algeria on 3 July 1940. However, it was too risky to operate off the French coast as capital ships would be vulnerable to air attack from land-based aircraft as had been proved by the sinking of the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser *Repulse* by the Japanese on 10 December 1941. An assessment by the British had estimated that an amphibious force of some two divisions would be necessary to mount an attack on similar lines to the successful raid on the French port of St Nazaire. An operation on such a scale was not possible at this stage of the war as most British resources were being employed in North Africa against Rommel's Afrika Korps and for home defence. Additionally, an attack on a defended port was a dangerous and costly undertaking, as was be shown at Dieppe in August 1942.

The problem was passed to the Combined Operations staff to see if there was an unconventional means for the destruction of the German blockade-runners. Mindful of the success of Italian human-torpedo attacks against British ships in Alexandria in Egypt in December 1941, consideration was given to midget submarines but no British equivalent was as yet operational. There was, however, no shortage of ideas and a suggestion was made by Major H.G. Hasler for a raiding party to be formed using canoes, a method he had used to insert and extract agents from Norway earlier in the war. Captain T.A. Hussey, RN, pursued the idea and a unit called the Royal Marines Harbour Patrol Detachment was created to test the concept. 'Blondie' Hasler, as he was known, was placed in command and training began at Southsea with volunteers drawn from the Royal Marines' Small Arms School at Gosport. Rejecting the Folboat as used by the Special Boat Squadron, he approached the versatile marine designer Fred Goatley to build a suitable craft for his raiders. Goatley produced a two-man canoe capable of carrying 600 pounds which could be collapsed for easier stowage on board submarines. Known as the Cockle Mark 2, it had a flat bottom to allow it to be towed across beaches or land without damage. With its low profile in the water, it was undetectable by radar. It was propelled by its crew using double-bladed paddles that were readily converted into a single-bladed type for covert approaches to a target. Amongst the stores carried, the

### SPECIAL SERVICE GROUP ORDER OF BATTLE 1944–45

**1 Special Service Brigade**
*CO: Brig the Lord Lovat*
No. 3 Cdo
No. 4 Cdo
No. 6 Cdo
No. 45 RM Cdo
(UK)

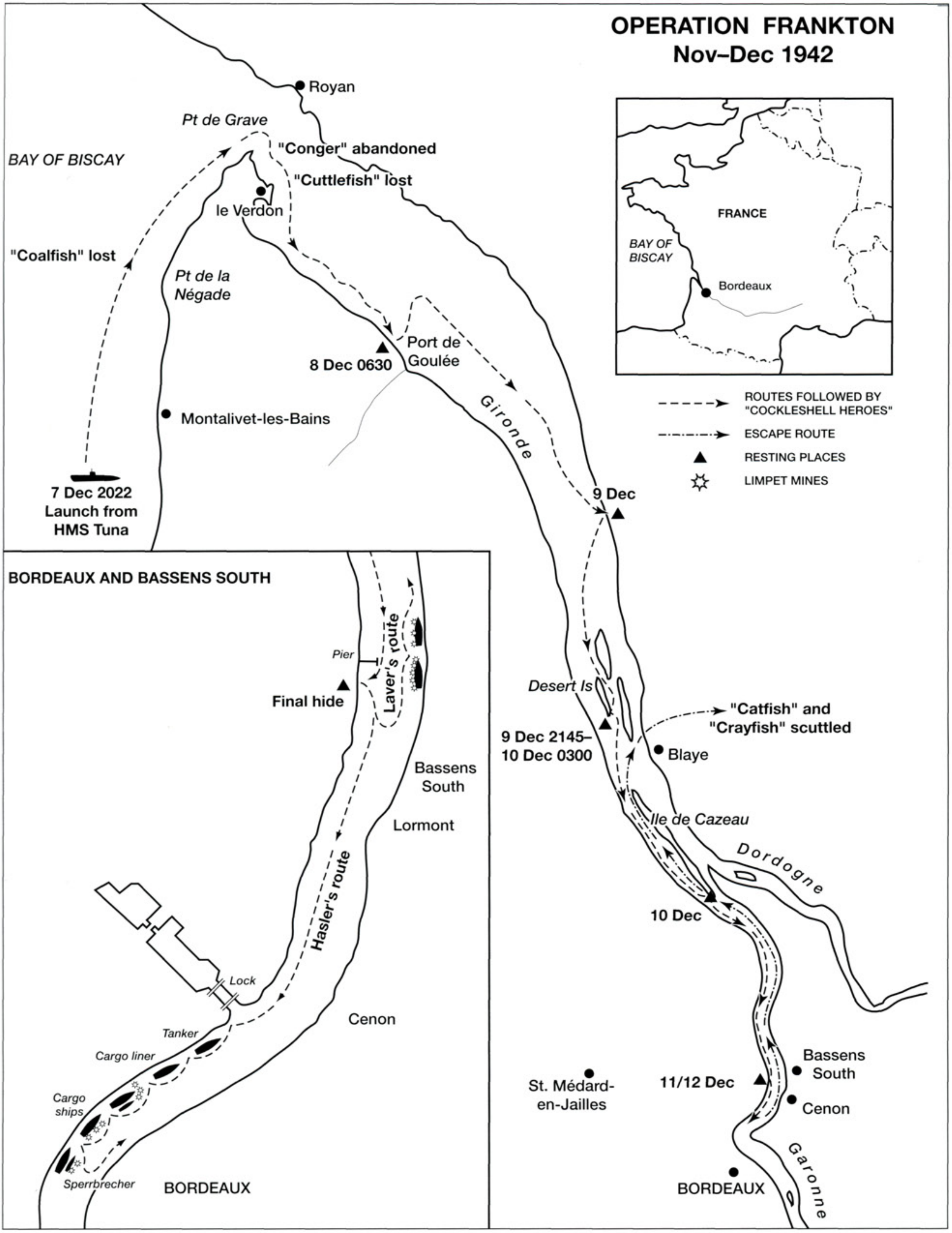
**2 Special Service Brigade**
*CO: Brig Jack Churchill*
No. 2 Cdo
No. 9 Cdo
No. 40 RM Cdo
No. 43 RM Cdo
(Italy)

**3 Special Service Brigade**
*CO: Brig D. I. Nonweiler*
No. 1 Cdo
No. 5 Cdo
No. 42 RM Cdo
No. 44 RM Cdo
(India)

**4 Special Service Brigade**
*CO: Brig B. W. Leicester*
No. 10 Cdo
No. 41 RM Cdo
No. 46 RM Cdo
No. 47 RM Cdo
(UK)

**Special Boat Unit**
RM Engineer Cdo

**Holding Commando**
Basic Training Centre
Mountain Warfare Centre
Group 2nd Echelon


OPERATION FRANKTON
Nov–Dec 1942
Royan
Pt de Grave
BAY OF BISCAY
"Conger" abandoned
"Cuttlefish" lost
le Verdon
"Coalfish" lost
Pt de la Négade
Port de Goulée
8 Dec 0630
Montalivet-les-Bains
Gironde
7 Dec 2022
Launch from
HMS Tuna
9 Dec
FRANCE
BAY OF BISCAY
Bordeaux
ROUTES FOLLOWED BY "COCKLESHELL HEROES"
ESCAPE ROUTE
RESTING PLACES
LIMPET MINES
BORDEAUX AND BASSENS SOUTH
Pier
Final hide
Laver's route
Bassens South
Lormont
Hasler's route
Lock
Tanker
Cargo liner
Cargo ships
Sperrbrecher
Cenon
BORDEAUX
Desert Is
"Catfish" and
"Crayfish" scuttled
9 Dec 2145–
10 Dec 0300
Blaye
Ile de Cazeau
Dordogne
10 Dec
St. Médard-
en-Jailles
11/12 Dec
Bassens
South
Cenon
BORDEAUX
Garonne

**Above:** Commandos of 101 Troop disembark from their Folboat during an exercise in Scotland in 1941. Originally part of No. 6 Commando, 101 Troop was the first independent unit of canoeists to be formed in November 1941 and subsequently became the Special Boat Section. *IWM – H14594*

most important were limpet mines to be attached by magnets to the target vessels as far below the waterline as possible by using a special rod. A timing device allowed the raiders to escape to a safe distance before they exploded.

As training proceeded, the name of the unit was changed to the Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment to disguise the nature of where it might operate. Further specialised equipment was designed to allow the fully stowed canoes and their crews to be launched from a submarine for maximum speed and safety. By the late autumn of 1942 'Blondie' Hasler had decided his team was ready for action. Preparations were made for Operation Frankton, an attack on the blockade-runners unloading in the French port of Bordeaux, although the actual target remained a secret to the Marines.The plan entailed transporting six cockles and their crews by submarine to the mouth of the Gironde River from where the Royal Marines were to paddle the 100 kilometres to Bordeaux by night while sheltering on the riverbanks by day. On 1 December 1942 'Blondie' Hasler and his team were embarked aboard the submarine HMS *Tuna*. Only then was the nature of the target revealed to them. The passage through the Bay of Biscay was stormy and many of the men suffered from severe seasickness in the claustrophobic confines of the submarine. The raiders were eventually disembarked using the special crane and sling attached to the deck gun during the evening of Monday 7 December. Despite calm seas, one of the cockles was damaged irreparably when its hull was ripped open by a hatch cover; the crew had to remain with the submarine.

The five surviving canoes and their crews began their approach to the French coastline some 15 kilometres away. All the canoes were named after fish, including *Catfish*, *Coalfish*, *Conger*, *Crayfish* and *Cuttlefish*. Maj Hasler and his crewman, Marine Bill Sparks, led the team in his canoe, *Catfish*. As they neared the coast, they encountered a violent tide race and *Coalfish* was lost in the teeming waters together with its crew.The two marines managed to swim ashore but were promptly captured, which alerted the Germans to the likelihood of an attack despite the protestations of the marines that they had fallen from a warship out at sea. Unbeknown to Hasler, German radar had spotted the submarine, *Tuna*, when it surfaced and patrol craft of the 8th Zerstörer Flotilla began to search the river mouth. No sooner had the raiders cleared this disaster than they came across another tide race and *Conger* capsized. Although clinging to Hasler's *Catfish* saved the crew, the cockle was lost and the raiders were now down to only three canoes and their precious limpet mines after only two hours in the water and with many miles still to go to Bordeaux. In the freezing water, Hasler paddled for the shoreline where he reluctantly abandoned Cpl Sheard and Marine Moffat to their fate. They too were captured by the Germans and shot as saboteurs following Hitler's orders in the wake of the Dieppe raid that all captured commandos were to be executed rather than being treated as prisoners of war.

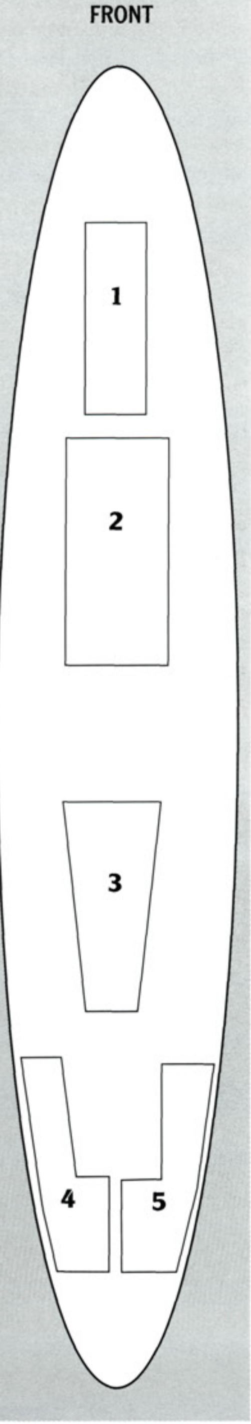
Delayed by these misfortunes, the remaining cockles next encountered a line of three German patrol boats sweeping the surface of the river with searchlights. By bending flat over the tops of their canoes, they managed to slip by but *Cuttlefish* with Lt J. Mackinnon and Marine Conway became separated from the main party and had to proceed alone. The turning of the tide hampered further progress. After paddling some 30 kilometres, the Marines were by now cold and exhausted. At 0630, the crews of *Catfish* and *Crayfish* came ashore at a place known as Pointe aux Oiseaux where the canoes were camouflaged and the Marines tried to sleep. As dawn broke, some French fishermen approached their position. Speaking in fluent French, Hasler persuaded them not to betray the raiding party. For the rest of the day, the Marines tried to catch some sleep under their camouflage nets as Fieseler Storch reconnaissance aircraft swept backwards and forwards along the riverbanks.

As night fell, Hasler and his three remaining companions silently slid into the channel and made good progress through the night with the help of the incoming tide and the line of buoys marking the waterway. At the Porte de Calonge opposite the vineyards of Pauillac, the raiding party found a new hiding place that again was compromised by a French man walking his dog. Once more Hasler tried to secure his silence but without any confidence and he decided to risk paddling during the early evening of 9 December just as a German patrol boat was heading directly towards their position. Having avoided this danger they paddled to their next hiding place on the Île de Cazeau where the Gironde divides into the Rivers Garonne and Dordogne. Unbeknownst to either party, the crew of *Cuttlefish*, Mackinnon and Conway, were hiding only a few hundred metres away on the same island. All the Marines were by now physically tired having paddled some 80 kilometres in three nights.

On the night of 10/11 December the weather favoured the raiders with a moderate breeze and low scudding clouds, giving a steady drizzle to mask their progress. Unfortunately, *Cuttlefish* was sunk at this time after striking an underwater obstacle. After hiding for some time with a sympathetic French couple in a village southeast of Bordeaux, Mackinnon and Conway were captured while attempting to enter Vichy France. The two remaining crews were able to arrive undetected at their final hiding place in some reed beds close to the vineyards of St Julien where they were able to sleep undisturbed throughout the day before the attack on Bordeaux. During the evening, the crews primed their limpet mines and prepared escape kits. After a final briefing the four men in their flimsy cockles set off for the docks of Bordeaux. Despite being bathed in light, Hasler and Sparks were able to approach undetected while Laver and Mills made for the eastern docks on the other side of the river. There the crew of *Crayfish* attached their limpet mines to the German merchantmen *Alabama* and *Portland*.

Meanwhile, the crew of *Catfish* slipped into the harbour basin and selected their first target, the 7,800-ton blockade-runner *Tannenfels*, which had only just arrived from Japan. Three limpet mines with eight-hour delays were fastened below her waterline next to the engine room. Hasler and Sparks then paddled upriver and attached two more to a minesweeper. They then approached a large freighter moored next to a tanker. To cover their activities, Hasler directed his canoe between the two vessels and had begun to attach his

## CANOE STOWAGE



**1**
Spare clothes
2 x fuse boxes
2 x cups
Soap
4 x escape boxes

**2**
Camo net
50ft fishing line
Repair kit
Nav gear
Paddle handgrip
Sounding reel
Flashlight
Grenade

**3**
Rations
Water cans

**4**
Magnetic holdfast
Grenade
Bailer and sponge
Paddle handgrip
Placing rod
4 x limpit mines
Wrench
Spare clothes

**5**
Box of small gear
Matches
Stove
Placing rod
4 x limpit mines
Spare clothes

**Above right:** German prisoners are disembarked from a Landing Craft Personnel following a raid conducted by No. 2 Commando which was part of Force 133. This unit conducted offensive operations along the Dalmatian Coast from a base on the island of Vis in the Adriatic Sea to assist Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia. *CMC*

**Below right:** Wearing their Assault Life Jackets, the men of P Troop of 41 Royal Marine Commando are inspected on board their landing ship just prior to Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. *CMC*

**Below:** Hill 170 – Capt Owen of 44 RM Commando recalled: 'As we advanced up Hill 170, along jungle covered features, I felt something was building up. We were hot and tired and regrettably many of us did not dig in as well as we should have done. Suddenly all hell let loose. Shells were bursting everywhere. I remember seeing a Marine hit in the pouch where he had carried a phosphorous grenade – terrible. We lost 60 men. The next day when we were burying them we were attacked again.' Over the next ten days, the Japanese made repeated fanatical attacks against Hill 170, losing over 2,000 casualties. For his heroism during the battle, Lt George Knowland was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the last Commando VC of the war. *CMC*

remaining charges to the 8,600-ton *Dresden* when one of its crewmen leant over the side of the ship and shone a torch on the raiders below. After what seemed an eternity he moved on without realising the threat. Having successfully fixed the limpet mines, they paddled into the middle of the current and let it take the *Catfish* downriver back to the Île de Cazeau where they were reunited with the crew of *Crayfish*, Laver and Mills.

After sinking the cockles that had brought them so far, the two crews split up and attempted to escape from the Bordeaux area in the early hours of 12 December. As they walked northwards, their delayed action charges exploded, causing considerable damage and dismay amongst the German naval command at the ease with which the defences of Bordeaux had been penetrated by such a small band of determined raiders. Once again the German defences were bolstered with additional troops as well as artillery weapons and other military paraphernalia, causing a further drain in strength from the fighting fronts.

With no knowledge of French, Laver and Mills were unable to seek help from the local populace and on the third day they were captured. Despite still being in uniform, they were summarily shot following Hitler's notorious *Kommandobefehl*. Sheard and Moffat had drowned at the mouth of the Gironde; the latter's body finally came ashore at Brest. Wallace and Ewart had already been killed even as the limpet mines were being emplaced. Mackinnon and Conway were taken to Gestapo Headquarters in Paris where they were tortured before being executed. Only Hasler and Sparks survived and, after a harrowing trip through France and Spain, they eventually returned via Gibraltar to England some five months later. Major 'Blondie' Hasler was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Marine Bill Sparks the Distinguished Service Cross. The Germans described Operation Frankton as the greatest Commando raid of the war.

## SPEARHEAD OF INVASION

1942 was the defining year for the Commandos and for the Allied war effort in general. The Commandos had enjoyed great successes in operations large and small, from St Nazaire to Bordeaux, albeit at a considerable cost in casualties. These Commando raids had also achieved the objective of siphoning off German manpower and matériel from the Eastern Front to defend the coastlines of occupied Europe from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean. They were also a considerable boost for civilian morale on the Home Front at a time when there was no other means to strike back at the enemy on the Continent. But the British and Americans had now begun a strategic bombing offensive against Germany that was to cost the Nazis dear. The year had also seen the first major defeats for the Wehrmacht at the battles of El Alamein and Stalingrad. From now on, despite several reverses, the Allies went from victory to victory on every front.

It was in part to capitalise on the victory at the battle of El Alamein that the Commandos were to find a new role. In November 1942 Nos. 1 and 6 Commandos, as well as several other specialised Combined Operations units (for example No. 30 Commando), took part in amphibious landings in Algeria. Codenamed Operation Torch, American and British forces invaded the Vichy French possession to take the Germans in Tunisia from behind in a pincer with the British Eighth Army advancing from Libya in the east. Initially, the Commandos landed prior to the main assault to capture vital features and gun emplacements, but were soon committed as line infantry during the battles for Tunisia. At Steamroller Farm and the Kasserine Pass, the Commandos suffered severe casualties due in part to their lack of heavy support weapons. By April 1943 the two Commandos were ground down from an initial strength of 1,000 to just 150 men and they were

SB

**Above right:** In what Brig Peter Young called ' a most hazardous procession of boats up the Chaung', 3 Commando Brigade is transported up the Daingbon Chaung in LCAs manned by sailors of the Indian Navy on 22 January 1945 to land deep behind Japanese lines to cut off their retreat down the Arakan. The units deployed were Nos. 1 and 5 Commandos together with Nos. 42 and 44 RM Commandos. *CMC*

**Below right:** Royal Marines struggle ashore through appalling terrain towards Kangaw; in the words of Brig Peter Young: 'There was no road. The landing was through mangrove; the paddy for about ¾ mile, leading to 170 [Hill 170 was the key objective] was swamped by the spring tides. Even the bunds didn't make proper footpaths being broken in many places. No tanks could be got ashore – or guns – the first few days but we had air support. . .' *CMC*

returned to Britain for refitting. It was time for a complete review of the operational role of the Commandos.

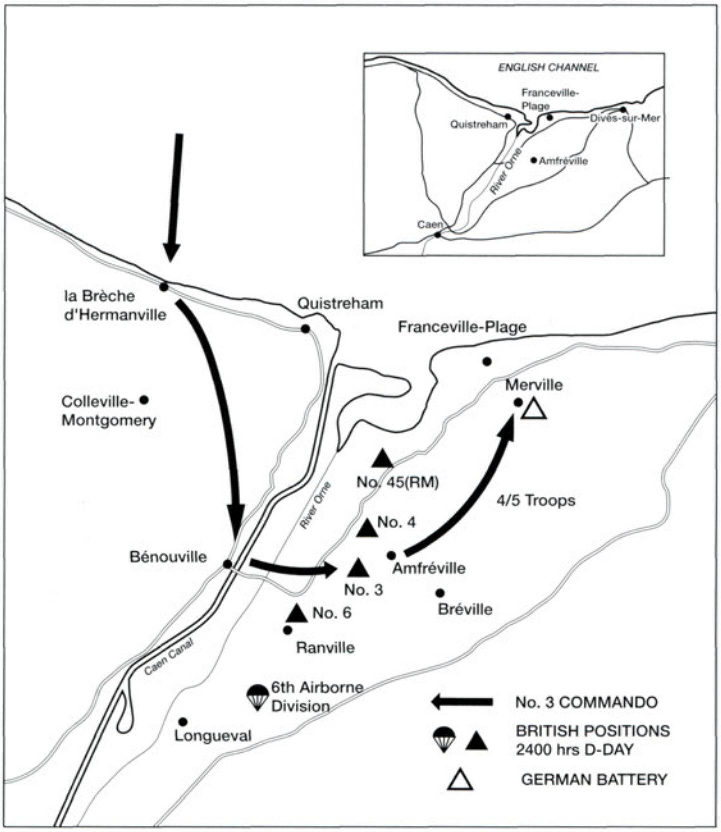
Although Commando raids continued across the Mediterranean and in the Far East, they were largely discontinued in northern Europe for fear of reprisals against the local populace. Intelligence gathering and specific sabotage missions were now the order of the day and these were the province of the SOE. During 1943 the Commandos lost two of their greatest advocates with the departure of Lord Mountbatten in August to take up a new post as commander of the allied forces in Southeast Asia (Maj-Gen Robert Laycock replaced him). As the war situation stabilised, Prime Minister Churchill lost his close personal interest in the Commandos, compounded by his disappointment in Combined Operations following the Dieppe disaster. Even so, the Special Service Brigade was greatly enlarged during the summer of 1943 to incorporate the newly formed Royal Marine Commandos. In November 1943 a new formation, the Special Service Group, was created with its own Headquarters under the command of Maj-Gen Robert Sturges RM (see box on page 48). It comprised four Special Service Brigades, with two based in Britain and one each in Italy and India. Each brigade now contained both Army and Royal Marine Commandos. Their primary role was as amphibious assault troops to spearhead the invasions of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Following the collapse of the Axis forces in North Africa in May 1943, the Allies launched Operation Husky on 10 July with landings on Sicily. Nos. 2 and 3 Commandos as well as 40 and 41 RM Commandos were tasked with guarding the flanks of the main landings and securing key objectives. There followed Operation Avalanche in September with the first landings on mainland Europe at Salerno in southern Italy. These operations came under the aegis of 2 Special Service Brigade. Thereafter, it organised Commando raids and landings on the Adriatic coast of Italy and in Albania and Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, Commando units fought throughout the campaign in Italy, including in the final decisive battle of Lake Comacchio where the Commandos gained one of their greatest battle honours and the Royal Marines their only Victoria Cross of World War II when Cpl Tom Hunter led a determined assault on an enemy position at the cost of his own life just days before the war in Europe ended.

When Mountbatten arrived in the Far East, he requested the deployment of one of the newly formed Special Service Brigades to his Southeast Asia Command. In late 1943 elements of 3 Special Service Brigade set sail for the Far East, arriving in India on 19 December. The brigade was based at Kedgaon near Poona. Its troops first saw action in Operation Screwdriver in March 1944 during the Arakan campaign in Burma. This campaign was to dominate 3 SS Brigade operations throughout the year.

In December 1944 the formation was redesignated 3 Commando Brigade under the command of Brig Peter Young. With the Japanese now in full retreat, the brigade was tasked with cutting their withdrawal route by amphibious landings behind enemy lines. On 22 January 1945, the brigade landed from assault craft with No. 1 Commando followed by No. 5 Commando and 42 RM Commando with 44 RM Commando in reserve. They occupied the dominating hill features around Kangaw and withstood repeated ferocious assaults by the retreating Japanese for the next 36 hours. With no tanks and few artillery guns in support, the Commandos resorted to hand-to-hand combat with their fighting knives. All the Commandos were heavily engaged and suffered serious casualties but the Japanese counterattacks were broken. In a Special Order of the Day, the corps commander, Lt-Gen Philip Christison, wrote: 'The battle of Kangaw has been the decisive battle of the whole Arakan campaign.' 3 Commando Brigade was withdrawn for refitting in preparation for Operation Zipper – the proposed invasion of Malaya – but the war ended before it could be implemented.

LCA 277


ENGLISH CHANNEL
Franceville-Plage
Quistreham
Dives-sur-Mer
Amfréville
River Orne
Caen
la Brèche d'Hermanville
Quistreham
Franceville-Plage
Colleville-Montgomery
Merville
No. 45(RM)
4/5 Troops
River Orne
No. 4
Bénouville
Amfréville
No. 3
Bréville
No. 6
Ranville
Caen Canal
6th Airborne Division
Longueval
No. 3 COMMANDO
BRITISH POSITIONS 2400 hrs D-DAY
GERMAN BATTERY

## D-DAY

By the time the Special Service Group was formed in November 1943, plans for the invasion of Europe were well advanced. Operation Overlord was to be the largest seaborne assault in history and the Commandos were to be in the vanguard. 1 and 4 Special Service Brigades were tasked with seizing the flanks of the British and Canadian landing beaches of Gold, Juno and Sword in Normandy on D-Day. On 6 June 1944, No. 3 Commando landed at la Breche d'Hermanville on Sword Beach with the critical mission of thrusting inland to link up with the men of 6th Airborne Division who had captured the vital bridges over the Caen Canal and Orne River the night before. By the end of the day the task was achieved against fierce resistance, which continued over the coming weeks. Together with No. 3 Commando, Nos. 4 and 6 Commandos as well as 45 RM Commando were among the first troops to land on D-Day followed shortly afterwards by Brig Lord Lovat and his HQ of 1 Special Service Brigade. The Royal Marines were heavily involved in the initial assault with some 17,500 Marines manning the ships and landing craft at sea while the men of 41, 45, 47 and 48 RM Commandos landed on D-Day and 46 RM Commando on D-Day+1. Royal Marines also manned Centaur

tanks in an Armoured Support Group of two regiments that provided close fire support during the initial landings.

All these Commando units took part in the fierce fighting of the hedgerows in Normandy and on to the Seine River. After 83 days of combat, 1 SS Brigade was withdrawn to Britain for refitting. Between D-Day and 30 September, both SS Brigades suffered over 50 per cent casualties. Operations continued through France, Belgium and Holland and in October 4 SS Brigade began amphibious training in Buffalo LVTs (Landing Vehicles Tracked) and Weasel amphibians for operations to open the port of Antwerp. On 1 November Nos. 41, 47 and 48 RM Commandos with No. 4 Commando and four troops of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando in support, landed at Westkapelle on the tip of Walcheren in the Scheldt estuary. Manned by Royal Marines, the support craft drew the fire of the German shore batteries from the assault craft and LVTs and suffered heavy casualties accordingly. Fierce fighting continued and the Commandos suffered over 500 casualties before the Allies opened the port of Antwerp at the end of November.

On 6 December 1944 the Special Service Group was redesignated the Commando Group while the SS Brigades became Commando brigades. During the winter of 1944/45, the Commandos spent most of the time in defensive posture around Antwerp and its environs and along the Maas River as the German Ardennes Offensive battered its way towards the port. On 23 January 1945 No. 45 RM Commando was involved in a bitter battle at Montforterbeek where L/Cpl Harden, RAMC, one of the unit's medical orderlies, won the Victoria Cross. By now the British Army was chronically short of infantry and two Royal Marine infantry brigades, 116 and 117, were formed from landing craft crews that were now surplus to requirements. 116 Brigade crossed the Maas River into Germany in February but 117 Brigade did not arrive until after VE Day. In March 1 Commando Brigade spearheaded the assault into Germany with the crossing of the Rhine at Wesel with No. 46 RM Commando in the van. In April 1 Commando Brigade came under the tactical command of 6th Airborne Division and then 11th Armoured Division for the opposed crossing of the Wesel River during Operation Plunder. On the night of 10/11 April No. 3 Commando seized a railway bridge over the Aller River against fierce resistance. By 19 April 1 Commando Brigade had reached Lüneberg where it left 11th Armoured Division and came under 15th Scottish Division for what was to be its last operation of the war. No. 6 Commando followed by No. 46 RM Commando spearheaded the crossing of the Elbe River in Buffalo LVTs at Lauenburg. During this time 4 Commando Brigade remained in Holland where it mounted raids and patrols to mop up pockets of German resistance and the various garrisons that had been isolated by the Allied advance.

Since D-Day, one of the Commandos' most secretive units had accompanied the front-line troops as they advanced across northwest Europe into Germany. No. 30 Commando, subsequently designated No. 30 Assault Unit, was tasked with gathering sensitive and important intelligence and documents, particularly plans and examples of new technology

**Above:** Army Commandos link up with the paratroopers of 6th Airborne Division after their capture of the vital bridges over the Caen Canal and Orne River on the eve of D-Day. The Commando on the right has the classic Bergen rucksack and toggle rope and is armed with a Colt automatic pistol while the Commando on the left is wearing a Battle Jerkin and a bandolier of ammunition clips for his No. 4 rifle. The Green Berets distinguish the Commandos from the helmeted paratroopers. *CMC*

**Above left:** Securing the Orne: No. 3 Commando's advance to Pegasus Bridge (taken by 6th Airborne on the night of 5/6 June) and the Merville Battery.

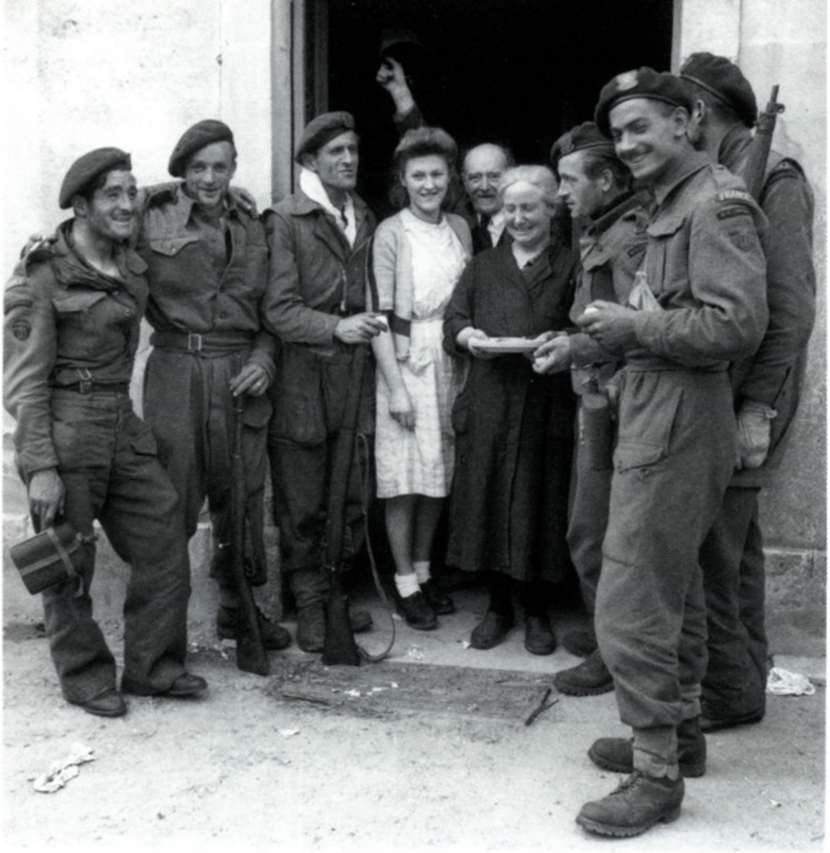
**Below left:** D-Day 6 June 1944 – the HQ of 1 Special Service Brigade wades ashore on Sword Beach at Ouistreham; the tall figure in the centre of the photograph wielding a stick is Brig Lord Lovat, the commander of 1 SS Brigade, with on the right in the foreground his piper, Cpl Bill Millin, who went ashore with just his bagpipes and an F-S fighting knife while wearing a kilt that his father had worn in the Great War. *IWM – B5103* weapons. No. 30 Assault Unit was often at the forefront of the advance and was among the first Allied troops into important towns and cities including Emden, Cologne, Kiel and Bremen, where 16 advanced Type XXI U-boats in various stages of construction at the Deschimag shipyard were captured by a team led by Lt-Cdr Patrick Dalzel-Job, RNVR. In the final months of the war and thereafter, the unit gathered a vast haul of technical intelligence as well as taking important technicians and scientists into custody.

After VE Day the Commando brigades were committed to occupation duties in Germany before returning to Britain where they were disbanded in 1946 following a decision by the Chiefs of Staff on 27 September 1945 to dispense with Army Commandos and pass responsibility for amphibious warfare to the Corps of Royal Marines. The Chief of Combined Operations, Maj-Gen Robert Laycock, had the unhappy task of making the announcement to his troops of 1 Commando Brigade:

> 'Today there is no battle in store for you... and it is with a feeling of very deep regret that it has fallen to my lot to tell you – the Commandos, who have fought with such distinction in Norway and the islands in the North, in France, in Belgium, in Holland and in Germany, in Africa and in Egypt, in Crete and in Syria, in Sicily and in Italy, on the shores and in the islands of the Adriatic, and on the beaches and in the jungles of the Arakan and of Burma – it is, I repeat, with deep regret that I must tell you today that you are to be disbanded.'

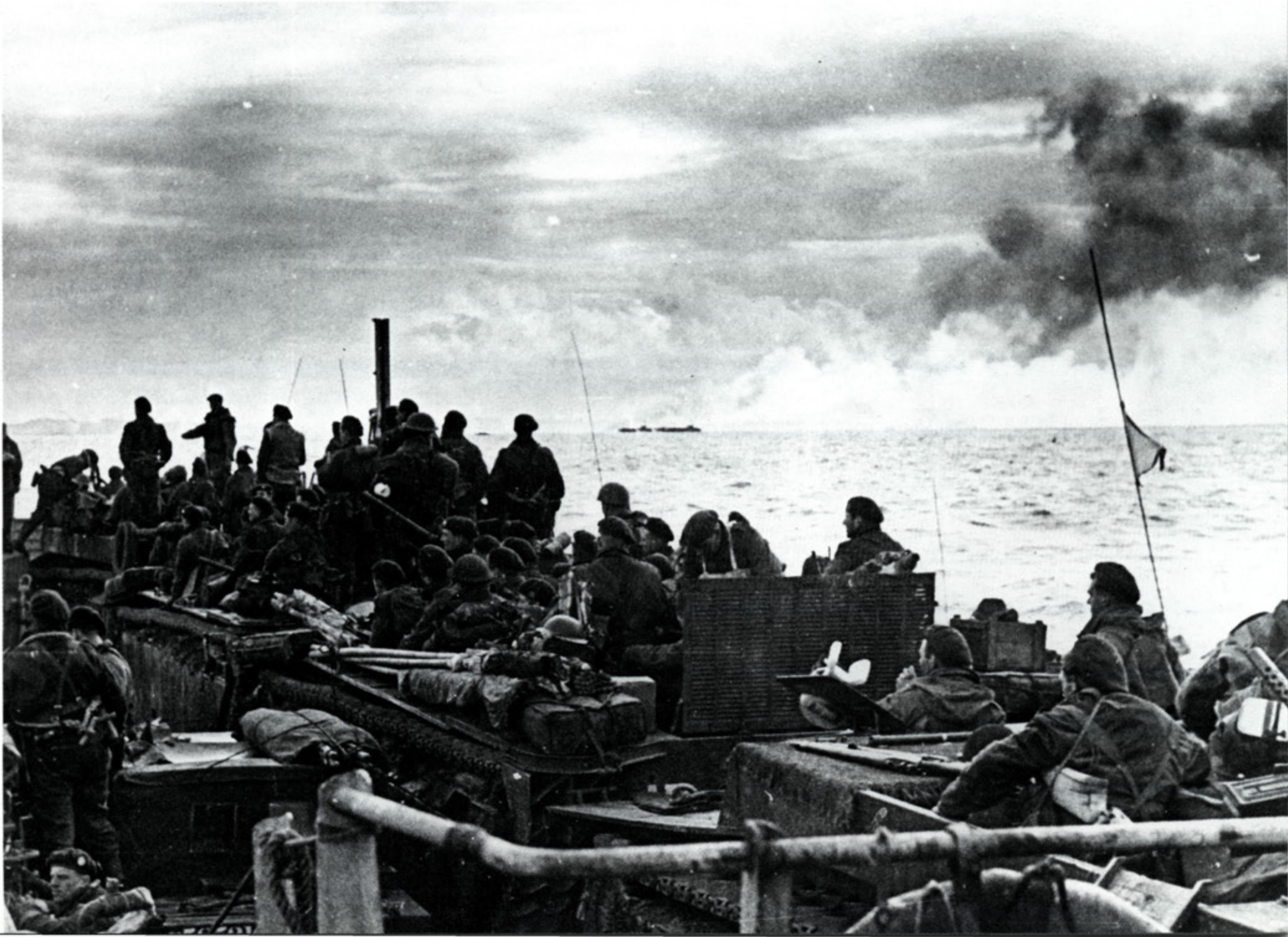
Laycock then went on to say that the famous Green Beret of the Army Commandos would die with them. After intervention from Lord Mountbatten, this at least was rescinded and the Royal Marines wear it to this day.

**Below:** In the dying days of the Nazi regime, No. 30 Assault Unit was at the van of the British XXX Corps and its Humber scout cars were among the first Allied troops into the city of Bremen and took the surrender of the Burgomeister on 26 April 1945. Here, No. 30 AU scout cars of B Troop rest outside the Bremen Rathaus or City Hall during the surrender negotiations. *CMC*



**Left:** After years of Nazi occupation, French citizens celebrate their liberation at the hands of these French members of No. 4 Commando. Besides the Commando shoulder flash and Combined Operations badge, these Commandos display the cap badge of French naval infantry. *IWM – B5279*

**Below:** Operation Infatuate was spearheaded by Nos. 41, 47 and 48 RM Commandos of 4 SS Brigade supported by No. 4 Commando and four troops from No. 10 (IA) Commando. After training in the specialised AFVs of the 79th Armoured Division, the Royal Marines landed on the water-logged island of Walcheren in Buffalo and Weasel amphibious tracked vehicles. These are shown here aboard a landing ship on the approach to the island, with Buffalo LVTs on the right and Weasels on the left. *CMC*



**Right:** No. 30 Commando was a specialised unit used to gather military and technical intelligence at the forefront of the Allied advance. By D-Day, it was known as No. 30 Assault Unit and its Royal Navy contingent was commanded by Lt-Cdr Patrick Dalzel-Job, RNVR, shown here in April 1945 wearing the relatively rare Officers Field Boots and armed with an F-S Commando dagger strapped to his thigh and over his shoulder an M1A1 Carbine with folding stock, as issued to US paratroopers. *CMC*

**Below:** Commando equipped with the icon of the Commandos – the Chicago piano – the Thompson submachine gun.

## COMMANDO UNITS

### No. 1 Commando

The former A Special Service Company became No. 1 Commando on 5 March 1941. It subsequently supplied personnel for the airborne forces. After some cross-Channel raids, it took part in the Operation Torch landings in North Africa and then deployed to the Far East in 1943. At the end of the war, it amalgamated with No. 5 Commando and was disbanded in 1946.

### No. 2 Commando

Formed in March 1941, No. 2 Commando was composed of men from 34 different regiments and corps. It was reformed after its original personnel transferred to the airborne forces and then fought on the St Nazaire raid where it was wiped out. Reformed again it deployed to the Mediterranean where it fought in Sicily, Italy and Yugoslavia. No. 2 Commando was disbanded in 1946.

### No. 3 Commando

Formed in June 1940, No. 3 Commando became the senior Commando unit after Nos. 1 and 2 became airborne troops. It took part in the first major raids on the Lofoten Islands, Vaagsø and Dieppe. During 1943 No. 3 Commando fought in Sicily and Italy before returning to Britain. No. 3 Commando landed in Normandy on D-Day to link up with the airborne forces. It fought at the Rhine Crossing and the advance to the Elbe. No. 3 Commando was disbanded in 1946.

### No. 4 Commando

Formed in June 1940, No. 4 Commando comprised volunteers from 85 different units. It achieved fame by destroying gun batteries before the Dieppe raid. It landed in Normandy on D-Day and later fought at Walcheren. No. 4 Commando was disbanded in January 1947.

### No. 5 Commando

Formed in June 1940, No. 5 Commando undertook cross-Channel raids before joining Operation Ironclad and the invasion of Madagascar in 1942. It then deployed to Burma and was amalgamated with No. 1 Commando before No. 5 Commando was disbanded in January 1947.

### No. 6 Commando

Formed in the summer of 1940, No. 6 Commando personnel participated in various raids but first fought as an entity during the landings in Algeria in November 1942 – alongside US forces and using some of their equipment such as helmets and Garand rifles. It returned to Britain for the Normandy landings and subsequently fought across North-West Europe to the River Elbe. It had a special seaborne troop of raiders – 101 Troop – formed by Capt G.C. Montanaro using civilian Folboat canoes. 101 Troop later became the Special Boat Section. No. 6 Commando was disbanded in 1946.

### No. 7 Commando

Formed in August 1940, No. 7 Commando was sent to the Middle East as part of Layforce in 1941. It fought in Crete in 1941, suffering heavy losses, and was then disbanded.

### No. 8 Commando

Formed in mid-summer 1940, mainly from the Guards Regiments of the Household Division, No. 8 Commando suffered the same fate as No. 7 Commando.

### No. 9 Commando

Formed in mid-1940, No. 9 Commando comprised many Scottish troops and, after deployment to

Gibraltar, it fought in the Italian campaign, in the Aegean and in Greece. No. 9 Commando was disbanded in 1946.

### No. 10 Commando

Efforts to raise No. 10 Commando in August 1940 failed due to a lack of volunteers from Northern Command and those that did were posted to other Commandos. The unit was resurrected in January 1942 as No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando – *see separate box on page 36.*

### No. 11 (Scottish) Commando

Formed in June 1940 from Scottish Command, No. 11 Commando gave itself the unofficial title of 'Scottish'. Like Nos. 7 and 8 Commandos, it formed part of Layforce and fought in Syria where it suffered heavy losses. It was disbanded in Cyprus in the late summer of 1941.

### No. 12 Commando

Formed from British Troops in Northern Ireland (BTNI) in August 1940, No. 12 Commando BTNI first saw action in the diversionary raid on the Lofoten Islands during Operation Archery. After several successful raids up to September 1943, the unit was disbanded in December due to dwindling numbers of volunteers with the remainder being transferred to No. 9 Commando.

### 'No. 13 Commando'

For superstitious reasons there was no No. 13 Commando.

### No. 14 Commando

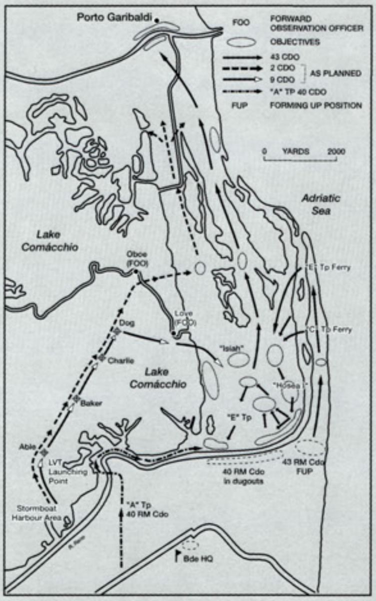
Formed in 1942, No. 14 Commando was a specialised unit intended for sabotage operations in Norway and the Arctic Circle in conjunction with SOE. It was created after a raid by men from No. 2 Commando codenamed Operation Musketoon on the night of 20/21 September 1942 to attack a power station at Glomfjord. Although this was successful, several of the raiders were killed or captured. The prisoners were the first Commandos to be executed following Hitler's *Kommandobefehl* in October. No. 14 Commando was composed of two troops: one specialised in small boat operations and the other in cross-country skiing. Personnel from Nos. 12 and 14 Commandos subsequently served in Northforce and Timberforce for raids and reconnaissance missions in Norway.

### No. 30 Commando

Formed on 30 September 1942 as the Special Engineering Unit, it comprised three troops with No. 33 Royal Marine, No. 34 Army and No. 36 RN or Technical – No. 35 was to be a Royal Air Force section but this was never formed. No. 30 Commando had a very specific role, to gather technical intelligence and enemy documents during Commando raids and amphibious assaults. The unit was formed at the instigation of Cdr Ian Fleming, RNVR, later the author of the James Bond books, and all its personnel underwent basic Commando training. It first went into action during Operation Torch in November 1942. Thereafter No. 30 Commando participated in most amphibious landings and was at the forefront of the Allied advance into enemy territory to gather technical intelligence.

ROYAL NAVY
30

## LAKE COMÁCCHIO



The campaign in Italy was brutal and unremitting and never lived up to Churchill's belief that the country was the 'soft underbelly of Europe'. Fighting was savage to the end and no more so than around Lake Comácchio in April 1945 when the Commandos of 2 Commando Brigade tied down the German defences on the flank of the major Allied offensive through the Argenta Gap. The amphibious assault was much hampered by weeks of drought that had lowered the water level of the lake and the assault boats could not be launched from the shore and in the words of one officer – 'For hours men heaved and dragged and pushed unwieldy craft across more than a mile of stinking glutinous mud…It was a nightmare mixture of Venice by moonlight and the end of the Henley Regatta'. However, the men of Nos 2 and 9 Commandos and Nos 40 and 43 (Royal Marine) Commandos prevailed and the attack was a great success. Comácchio became another Battle Honour for the Commandos and Gen McCreery informed 2 Commando Brigade that 'its successes in the mud and water flats round Argenta had marked the decisive phase of the battle' which led to the surrender of all German forces in Italy on 2 May 1945, a week before the collapse of Germany.

### *No. 40 RM Commando*

Formed on 14 February 1942 as the Royal Marine Commando, subsequently A Battalion RM Commando, and from 18 October 1942 as 40 RM Commando. First saw action at Dieppe in Operation Jubilee, suffering heavy losses. Reformed and landed in Sicily in July 1943, subsequently fought in Italy and Yugoslavia. Ended the war fighting in Italy including at Comacchio. Returned to the UK in June 1945. Pronounced 'Forty Commando.'

### *No. 41 RM Commando*

Formed on 10 October 1942, 41 RM Commando first saw action in Sicily, suffering heavy casualties. Withdrawn to the UK before landing in Normandy on D-Day. It fought at Walcheren and in the Maas River area. Returned to the UK in November 1945. Pronounced 'Four One Commando.'

### *No. 42 RM Commando*

Formed in August 1943, 42 RM Commando first saw action in Burma in November 1944 where it fought for the remainder of war before moving to Hong Kong in September 1945 where it was stationed until June 1947.

### *No. 43 RM Commando*

Formed on 1 August 1943, 43 RM Commando deployed to North Africa in late 1943 and first saw action in January 1944 at Anzio. It then conducted raids on the Dalmatian Islands of Yugoslavia before returning to the Italian campaign in March 1945. Returned to the UK in June and was absorbed into 40 Cdo RM in September.

### *No. 44 RM Commando*

Formed on 1 August 1943, 44 RM Commando deployed to the Far East in late 1943 and first saw action in Burma in March 1944. It fought in the Far East for the remainder of the war. Deployed to Hong Kong in 1945 until March 1946, when it was disbanded and its personnel absorbed into 40 Cdo RM.

### *No. 45 RM Commando*

Formed August 1943, 45 RM Commando landed in Normandy in D-Day where it fought for 83 days before returning to the UK. Deployed to Holland in January 1945, it participated in the major river crossings into Germany and ended the war at Neustadt on the Baltic. Returned to the UK in June 1945.

### *No. 46 RM Commando*

Formed in August 1943, 46 RM Commando landed in Normandy on D-Day+1 and fought until late August when it was withdrawn from the front line after suffering heavy losses. Returned to the UK to join 1 Special Service Brigade. Deployed to Belgium in January 1945 and moved to Antwerp before fighting across the Rhine River to the Elbe River. Returned to the UK in June 1945 before being disbanded in January 1946.

### *No. 47 RM Commando*

Formed on 1 August 1943, 47 RM Commando landed in Normandy on D-Day+1 and saw much action in France and Holland culminating in the landings at Walcheren. Moved to Germany after VE Day and returned to the UK in November. It was disbanded in January 1946.

### *No. 48 RM Commando*

Formed in March 1944, 48 RM Commando landed in Normandy on D-Day and captured the German strongpoint at Langrune-sur-Mer where it suffered almost 50 per cent casualties. After reinforcement, it saw extensive action across North-West Europe as the Allies advanced on Germany and fought its last action on 23 April 1945 at Biesboch in Holland. After occupation duties in Germany, it returned to the UK in November 1945 and was disbanded in January 1946.

### *No. 50 Commando*

Formed in July 1940 in the Middle East from volunteers in Egypt and Palestine. It was amalgamated into Layforce as D Battalion before serving in the Dodecanese Islands and the battle for Crete, where it suffered such heavy casualties that it was disbanded.

### *No. 51 Commando*

Formed in October 1940 in the Middle East with a large contingent of Jewish and Palestinian volunteers, No. 51 Commando fought the Italians in Ethiopia and Eritrea and then supported Orde Wingate, the founder of the Chindits in Burma, in organising Ethiopian irregulars into an effective force. It was subsequently absorbed into the Middle East Commando.

### *No. 52 Commando*

Formed in October 1940 in the Middle East, No. 52 Commando saw action against the Italians in Ethiopia in January 1941 before returning to Egypt. It was then amalgamated into Layforce as D Battalion and thereafter suffered the same fate as No. 50 Commando.

### *Middle East Commando*

Formed from the remnants of Layforce, at the insistence of Winston Churchill, to retain Commandos in the Middle East, the Middle East Commando was short-lived and, in the summer of 1942, was absorbed into Lt-Col David Stirling's 1st Special Air Service Regiment.

### *No. 62 Commando*

This was a cover name for the Small Scale Raiding Force – *see separate box on page 37.*

### *Special Boat Section*

The SBS was formed from the various Commando units, such as 101 Troop of No. 6 Commando, which had had conducted small-scale raids, agent insertion and reconnaissance missions using canoes and other small craft in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Far East. After the war, the role of canoe and small boat operations was continued by the Royal Marines, later leading to the Special Boat Service of today.

### *ROYAL NAVY COMMANDOS*

Following Operation Ironclad in Madagascar, it was realised there was a need for greater control on the landing beaches to co-ordinate all the various elements such as landing craft, troop exit lanes and supply dumps. This gave rise to the creation of Royal Navy Beachhead Commandos. Each was commanded by a Principal Beachmaster with three sections each comprising two officers and 23 other ranks. All went through the standard Commando training course but at a special school at Ardentinny in Scotland. Beachhead Commandos were first used at Dieppe where they suffered heavy casualties. By the end of 1943, there were 22 RN Commandos, which were designated alphabetically – Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, etc. Like the COPP units, the RN Commandos were at the forefront of every assault landing in all theatres of the war.

Below: The officers of Hotel Commando relax between missions at Chittagong in January 1944. These men acted as beachmasters to control all operations close to the waterline during amphibious landings and these Royal Navy Commandos served in every theatre of war. *CMC*

**Above:** The various national troops within No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando were used as interpreters and liaison officers throughout the Allied advance through Europe. These members of No. 2 (Dutch) Troop are conferring with locals at the town of Wolfhaze during Operation Market Garden on 18 September 1944. *CMC*

**Right:** With a Colt automatic pistol tucked into his back pocket, a Royal Marine Commando drops a bomb into a 3-inch mortar tube during fighting on the Lower Maas in Holland during April 1945. Heavy support weapons such as the 3-inch mortar became necessary when the Commandos made the transition from a raiding force to assault troops. *CMC*

MARGARET II
202
202

**Left:** German troops occupying the Scheldt estuary denied the Allies the deep-water port of Antwerp for many weeks in the autumn of 1944 with a disastrous effect on the supply chain to the frontline troops. The key to the German defences was the island of Walcheren and this became the target of Operation Infatuate which was launched on 1 November 1944. The landings were provided massive fire support by Royal Navy warships and RAF bombers as well as vessels such as this Landing Craft Support (Medium) manned by Royal Marines. During the actual assault these craft gave invaluable fire support and became priority targets for the German defenders thus saving many of the landing craft carrying troops. *CEC*

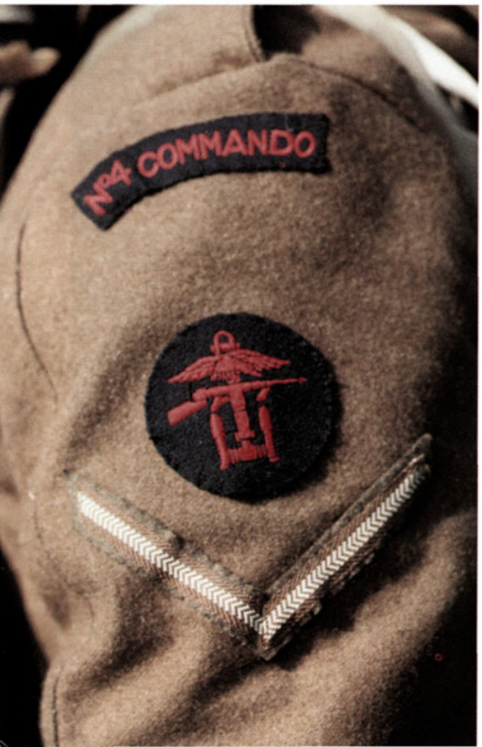
**Below:** Men of 1 Commando Brigade move through the war-devastated town of Osnabrück on 4 April 1945. During the attack, No. 3 Commando killed 50 Germans and captured 450. *CMC*

# INSIGNIA, CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

## INSIGNIA AND HEADGEAR

At the outset, all ranks within the Commandos wore their own regimental headdress and cap badge so every parade was a riot of different berets, tam-o'-shanter bonnets and forage caps of varying designs and colours. An attempt to introduce a standard form of headdress was resisted by the War Office due to its continuing antipathy towards the Commandos. This was all the more galling to the Commandos when the more recently formed Parachute Regiment was authorised to wear the maroon berets from which their nickname by the Germans of Red Devils derived. Nevertheless, the Commandos persisted and No. 1 Commando is credited with choosing the colour of the first Commando beret. Their original unit badge depicted a green salamander in a burst of red and yellow flames. Red was the colour of the despised Royal Military Police while yellow was deemed to be totally inappropriate leaving just green as a suitable colour. A local firm of tam-o'-shanter makers in Irvine, Scotland, produced the first berets and Lord Mountbatten approved the design on 1 May 1942. It gained official approval on 27 October 1942 and was issued to the Commandos immediately thereafter, although the troops continued to wear their own regimental cap badges in the new beret. In February 1946 Army Council Instruction 200 decreed that the green beret be the official head dress of the Royal Marine Commandos and it continues to be so to this day but with the Globe and Laurel cap badge and crest of the Corps of Royal Marines.

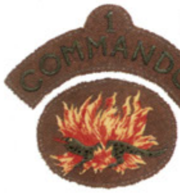
**Below:** The classic insignia of the Commandos with the shoulder title and the badge of Combined Operations.



## CLOTHING

Initially, the Commandos wore standard British Army battledress with '37 Pattern webbing and '36 Pattern ammunition boots. Although excellent general combat items, the latter were not best suited to stealthy Commando raids because their hobnail soles were excessively noisy on tarmac or shingle beaches. Accordingly, many Commandos wore 'gym shoes' during raids, but these were hardly durable during long approach marches or withdrawals so an over-wrapper for the ammunition boot which deadened the sound on hard ground or pebbles was devised particularly for the Commandos. In time, this was superseded by the rubber soled 'S.V.' boot which was introduced in time for Operation Chariot.

The first Commando units were quick to introduce their own particular markings and insignia and these adorned their multifarious headgear and battledress blouses before a more standardised system was introduced in 1942 when the famous Green Beret was issued.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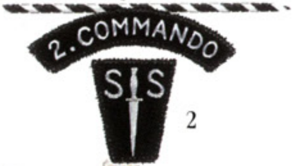
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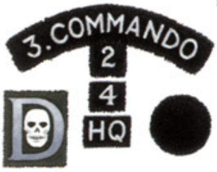
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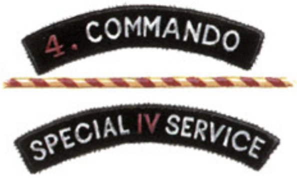
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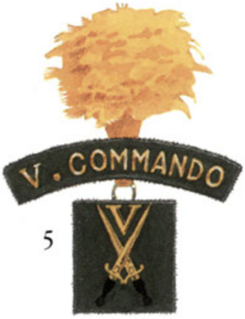
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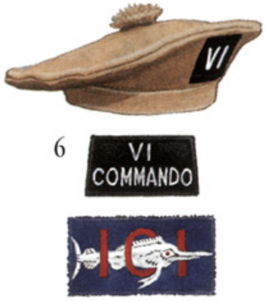
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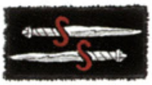
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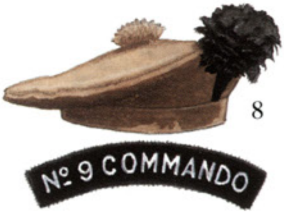
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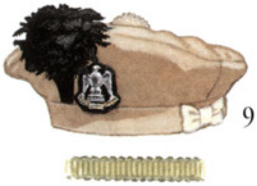
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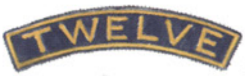
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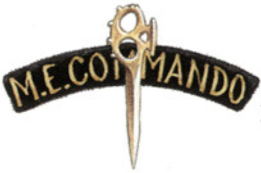
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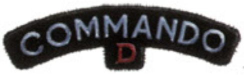
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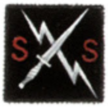
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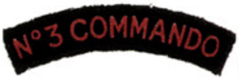
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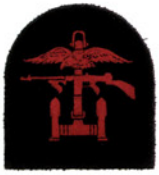
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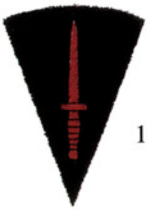
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1 The shoulder title and sleeve patch of No. 1 Commando showing a salamander being consumed by fire. It was this insignia that gave rise to the colour of the Green Beret.

2 The lanyard, shoulder title and sleeve patch of Special Service units and the silver dagger of No. 2 Commando.

3 No. 3 Commando adopted a shoulder title with an integral troop number or HQ element as well as patches for each troop – D Troop shown on the left and the black disc of 5 Troop on the right.

4 Shoulder titles and lanyard of No. 4 Commando.

5 Feather hackle, shoulder title and sleeve patch of No. 5 Commando.

6 Reflecting its Scottish origins, No. 6 Commando adopted the tam-o'-shanter with the Roman numeral VI for bonnet badge and shoulder title below which is the distinctive sleeve badge of 101 Troop, the pioneers of canoe and small boat raiding.

7 Sleeve patch of the Special Service Brigade HQ personnel.

8 No. 9 Commando also featured a tam-o'-shanter but with a black hackle as a unit badge below which is the shoulder title.

9 Predictably, No. 11 (Scottish) Commando was similarly adorned with a black hackle and its own green lanyard.

10 Shoulder title of No. 12 Commando.

11 Shoulder title of the Middle East Commandos with their distinctive 'fanny' knife.

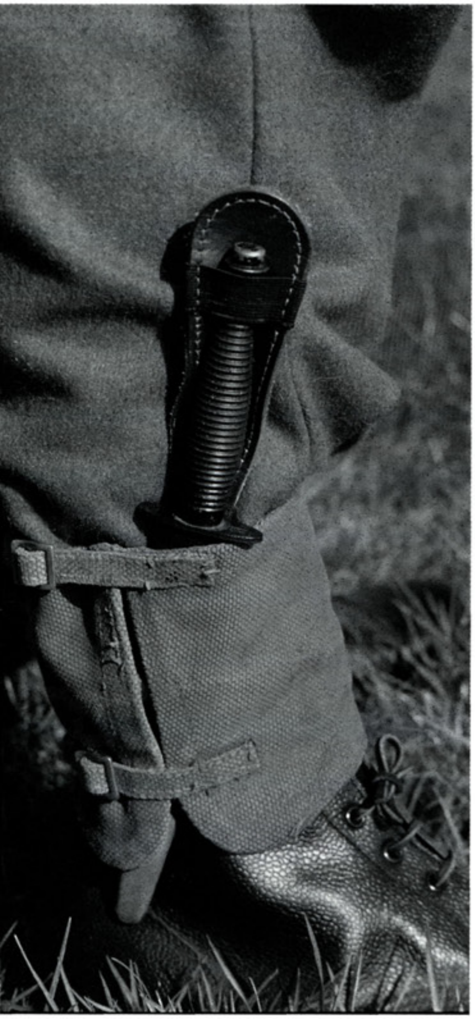
12 Shoulder title of the Commando Depot

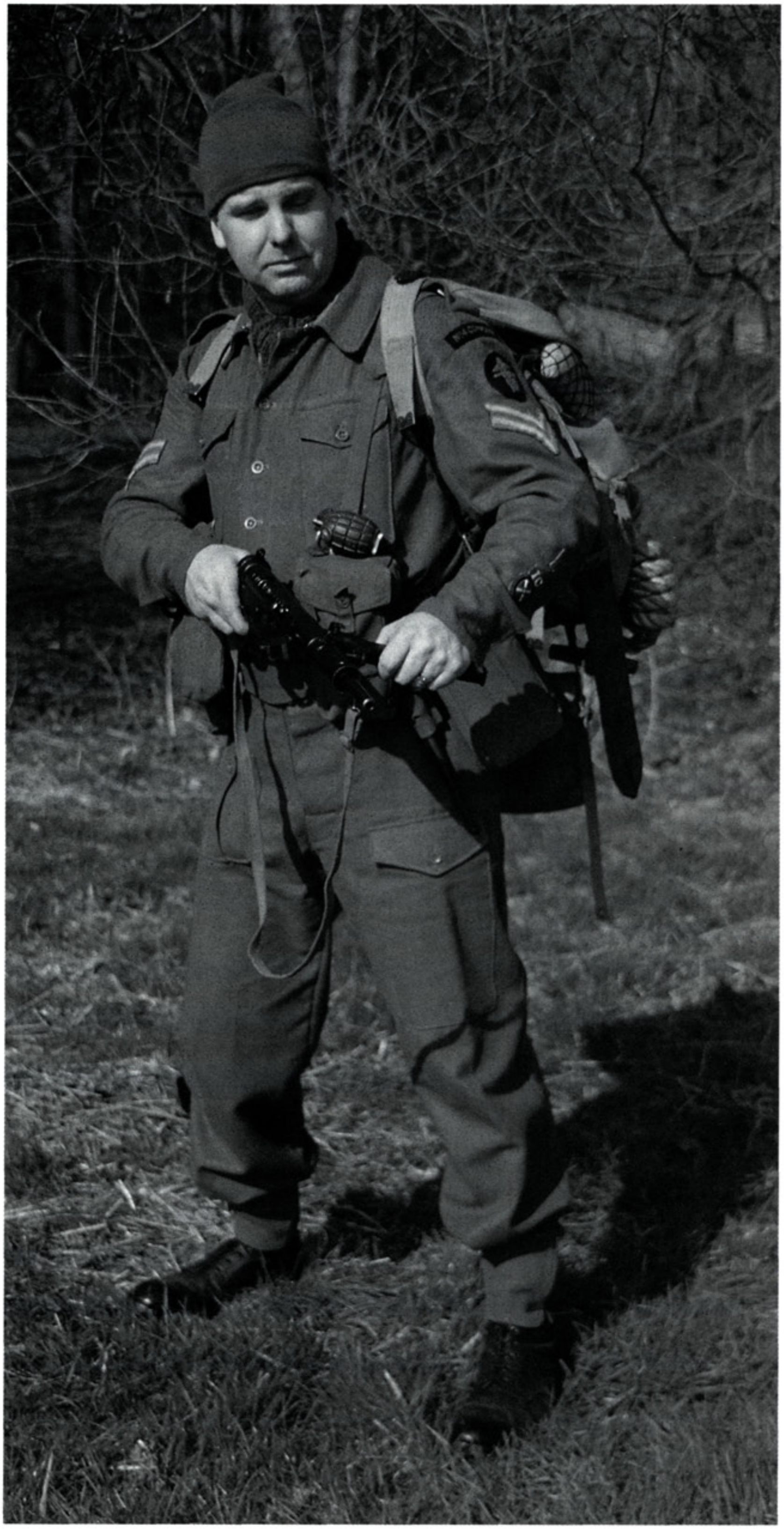
13 Sleeve patch of the Signal Troop, Special Service Brigade.

14 Standardised shoulder titles were introduced in 1942 of a simplified design with red lettering on a dark blue background.

15 Red and dark blue were also used for the badge of Combined Operations which incorporated the Tommy gun of the Commandos with a Royal Navy anchor and RAF eagle and came in various shapes and sizes.

16 When the Commando Group replaced the Special Service Group in December 1944, a sleeve badge was introduced depicting the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife and this replaced the Combined Operations badge in early 1945.It is noteworthy that these last two badges continue in use to this day as the British Armed Forces become more integrated in their command structure. It is interesting to observe that almost every senior officer of the British forces in Iraq in 2003 was seen sporting a Combined Operations patch on the right shoulder as a badge of tri-service solidarity in modern warfare.

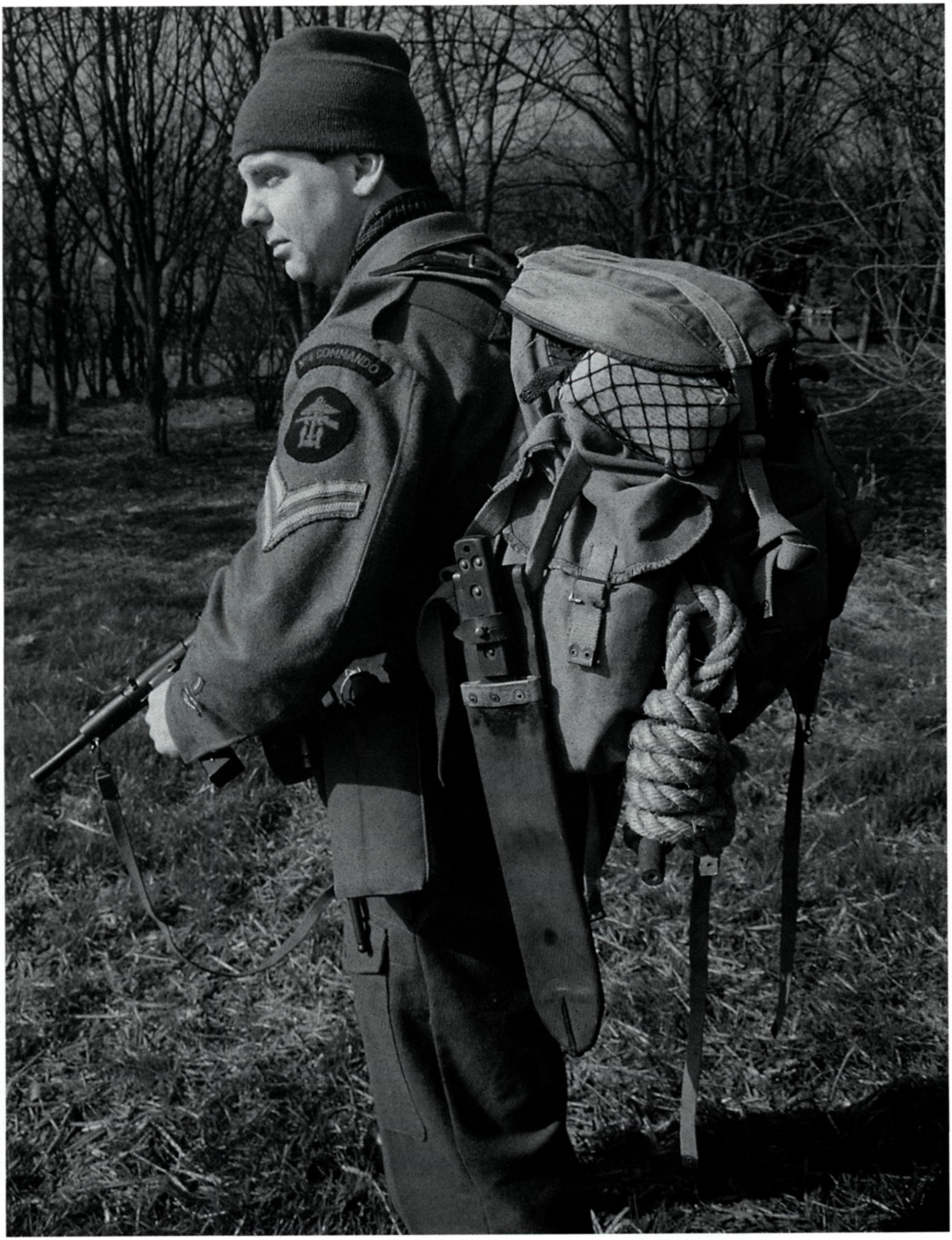




**Above:** The Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife appeared in three different versions and troops carried them as they saw fit for quick and easy accessibility. This is a third pattern knife.

**Right:** Armed with a 9mm Sten gun, a Commando displays the standard fighting order of battledress, Bergen rucksack and cap comforter.

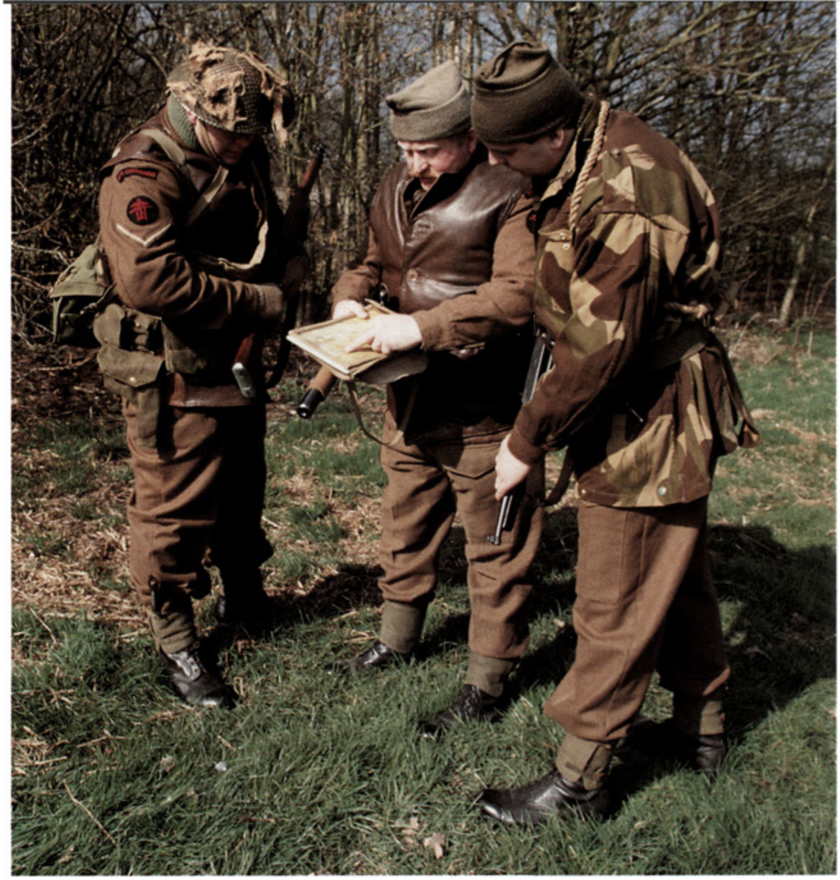
**Far right:** The Bergen rucksack was readily adopted by the Commandos following the Norwegian campaign of 1940. Originally intended to carry demolition charges, the Bergen was subsequently used by every Commando.

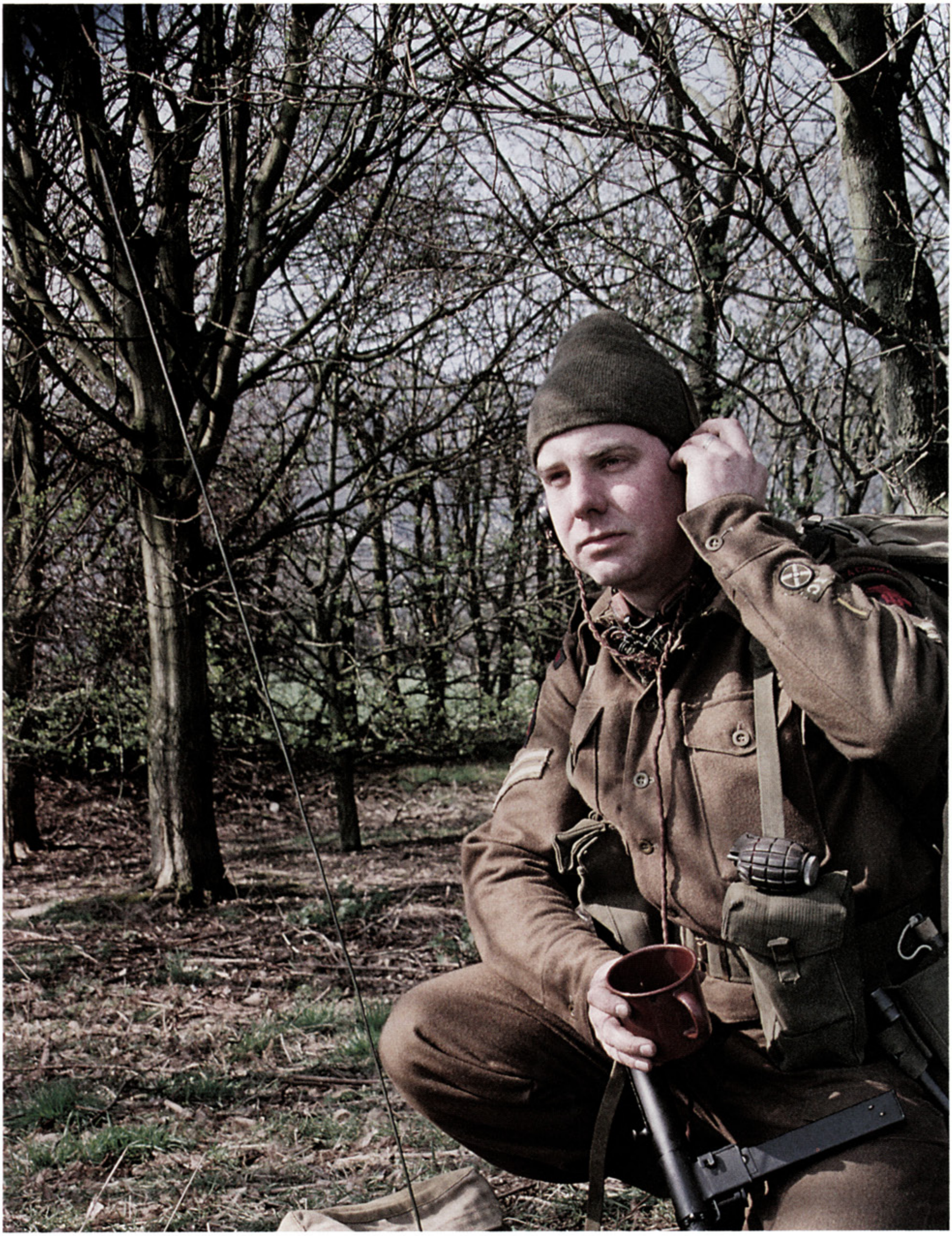

No 4 COMMANDO

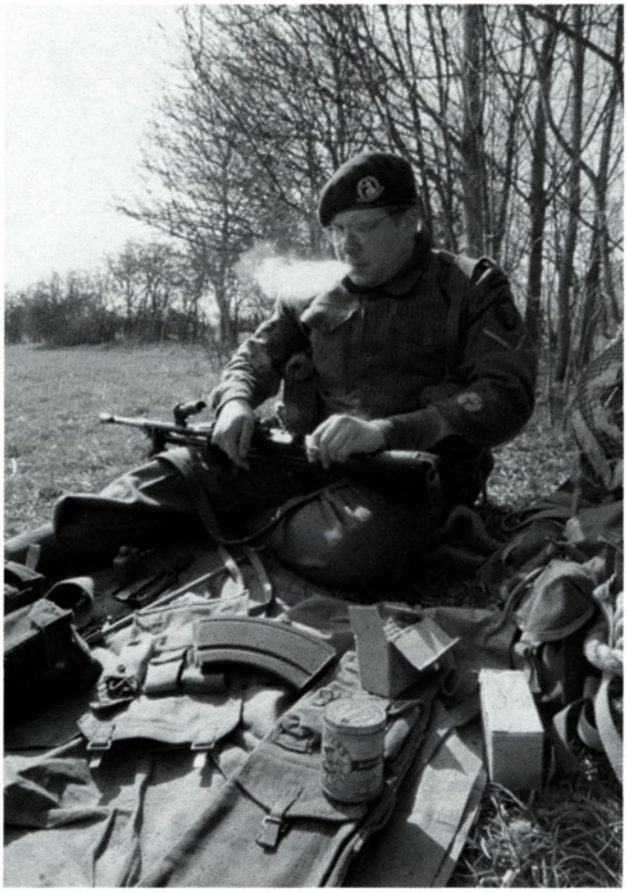
**Right:** By late 1944, the Commandos were issued with the paratroopers' camouflaged Denison smock which proved highly popular, as shown on the right. The other two Commandos are wearing the widespread sleeveless and collarless Jerkin, Leather which originated in the Great War.

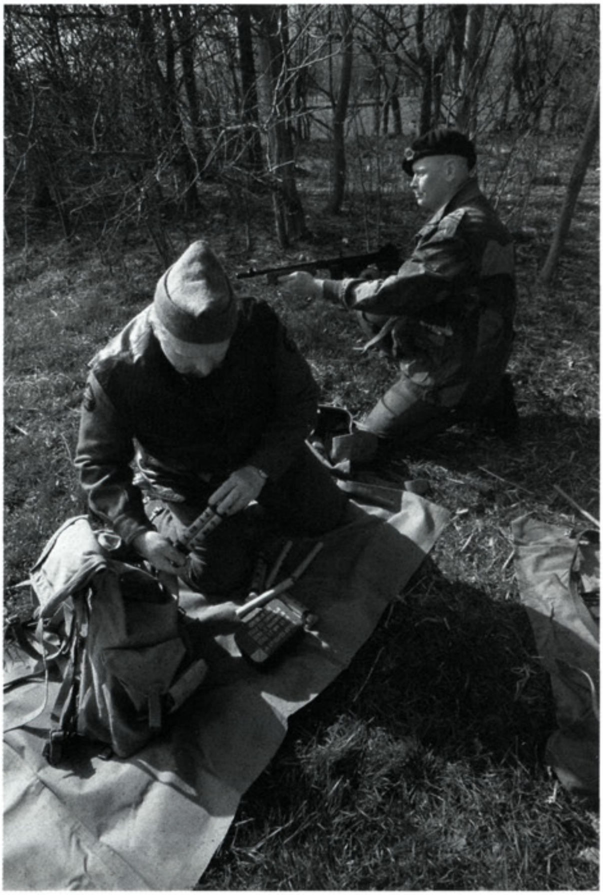
**Below:** A sniper merges into the vegetation as he scans for a target. Sniping was a particular skill of the Commandos and snipers were used aggressively to harass the enemy at every opportunity.

**Far right:** A Commando corporal grabs a cup of tea as he monitors his No. 38 radio set which had a maximum effective range of one mile.



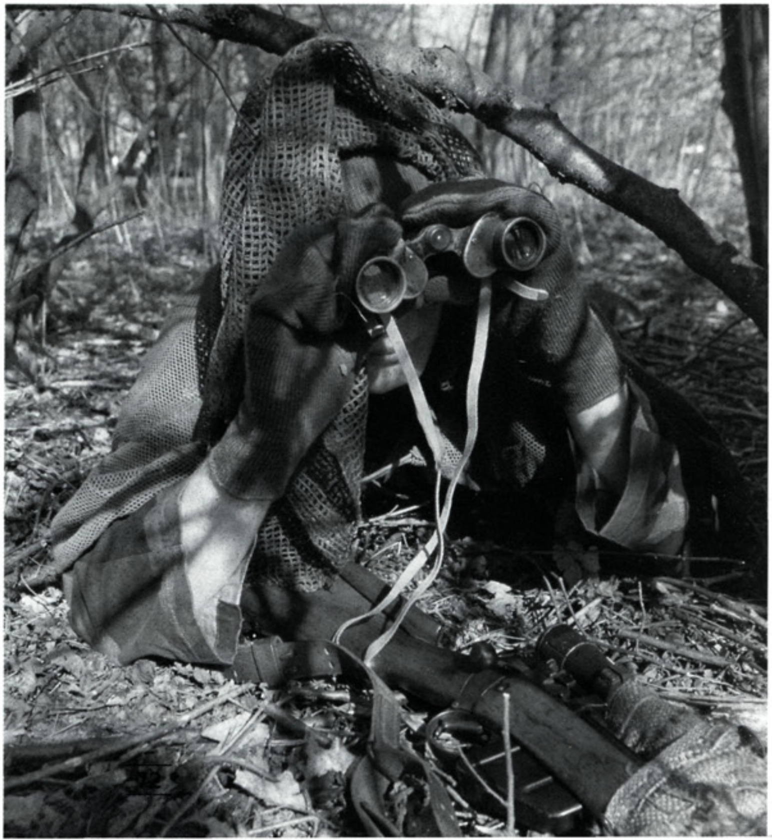






**Above:** A lance-corporal Bren gunner takes a smoke break while cleaning his weapon and replenishing the 28-round clips with .303-inch ammunition. The Bren gun was an excellent light machine gun which saw widespread service with the Commandos and every other British infantry unit during World War II.

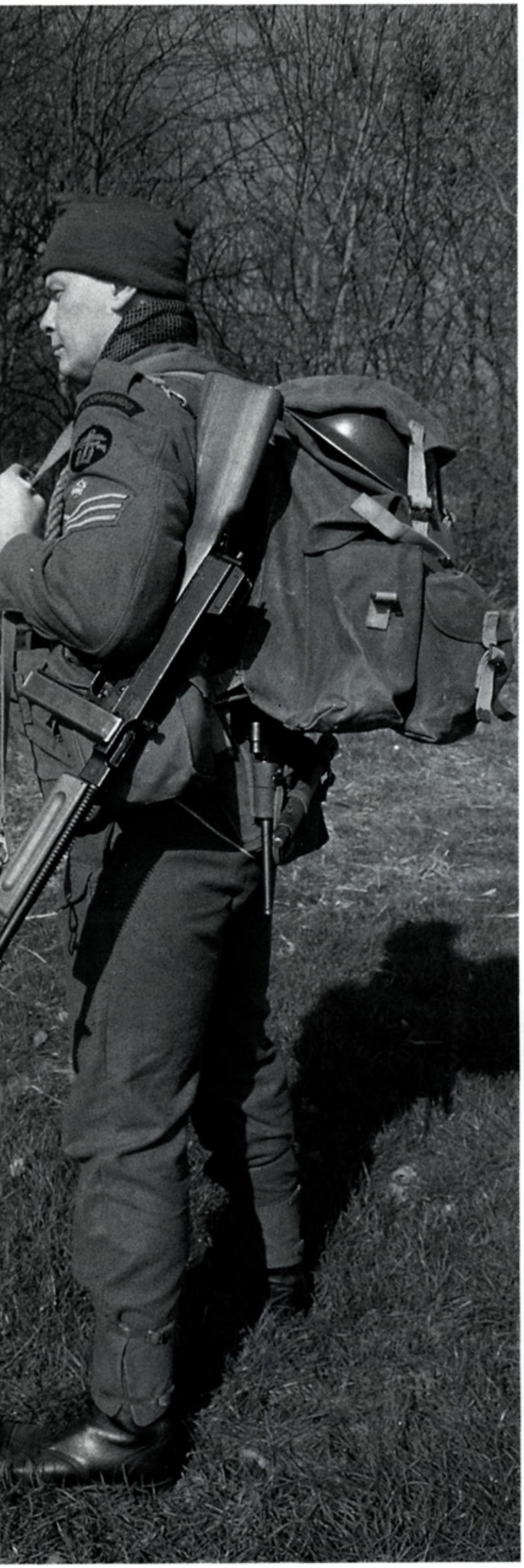
**Above right:** While a Commando stands watch with his Tommy gun, an officer prepares demolition charges from explosives carried in his Bergen rucksack.

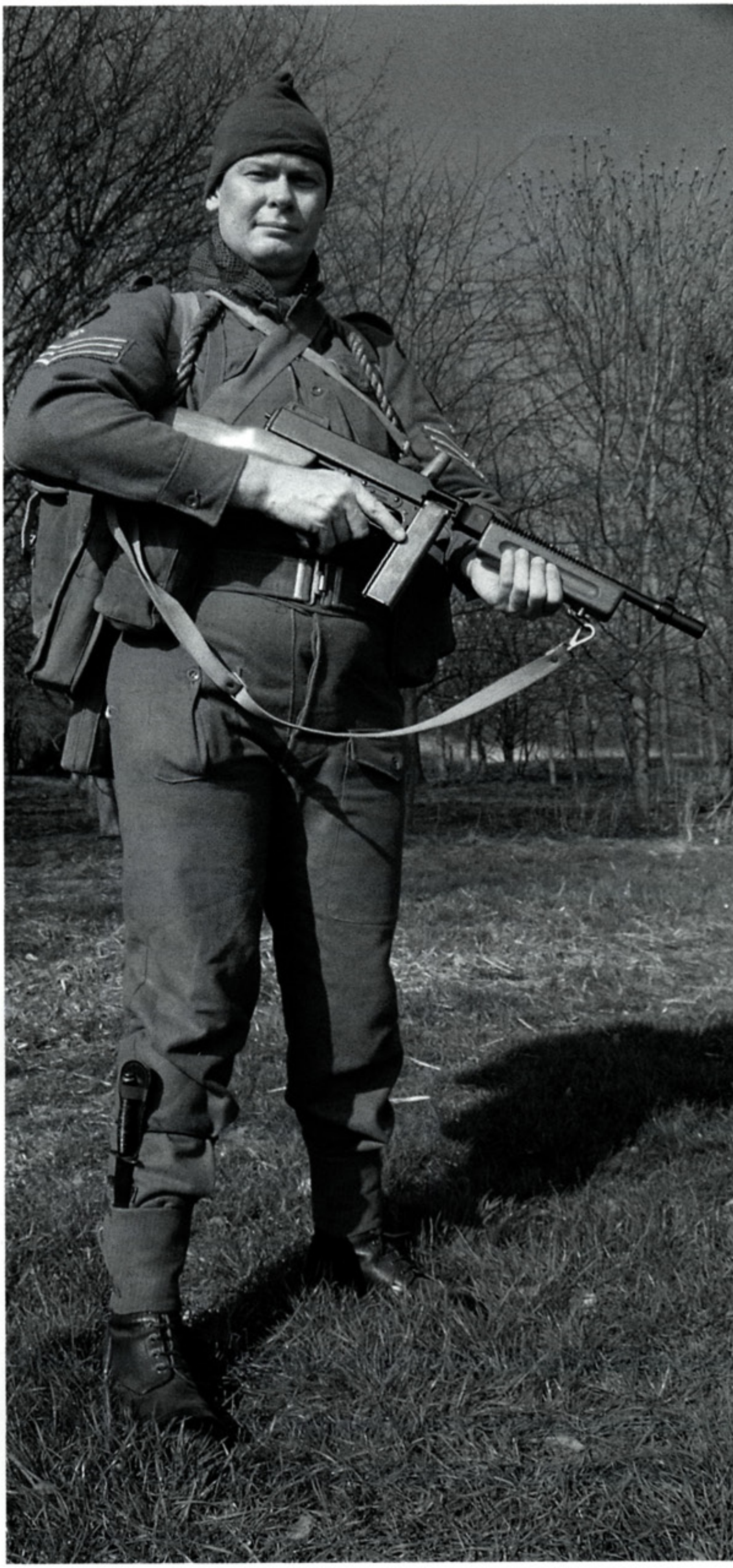


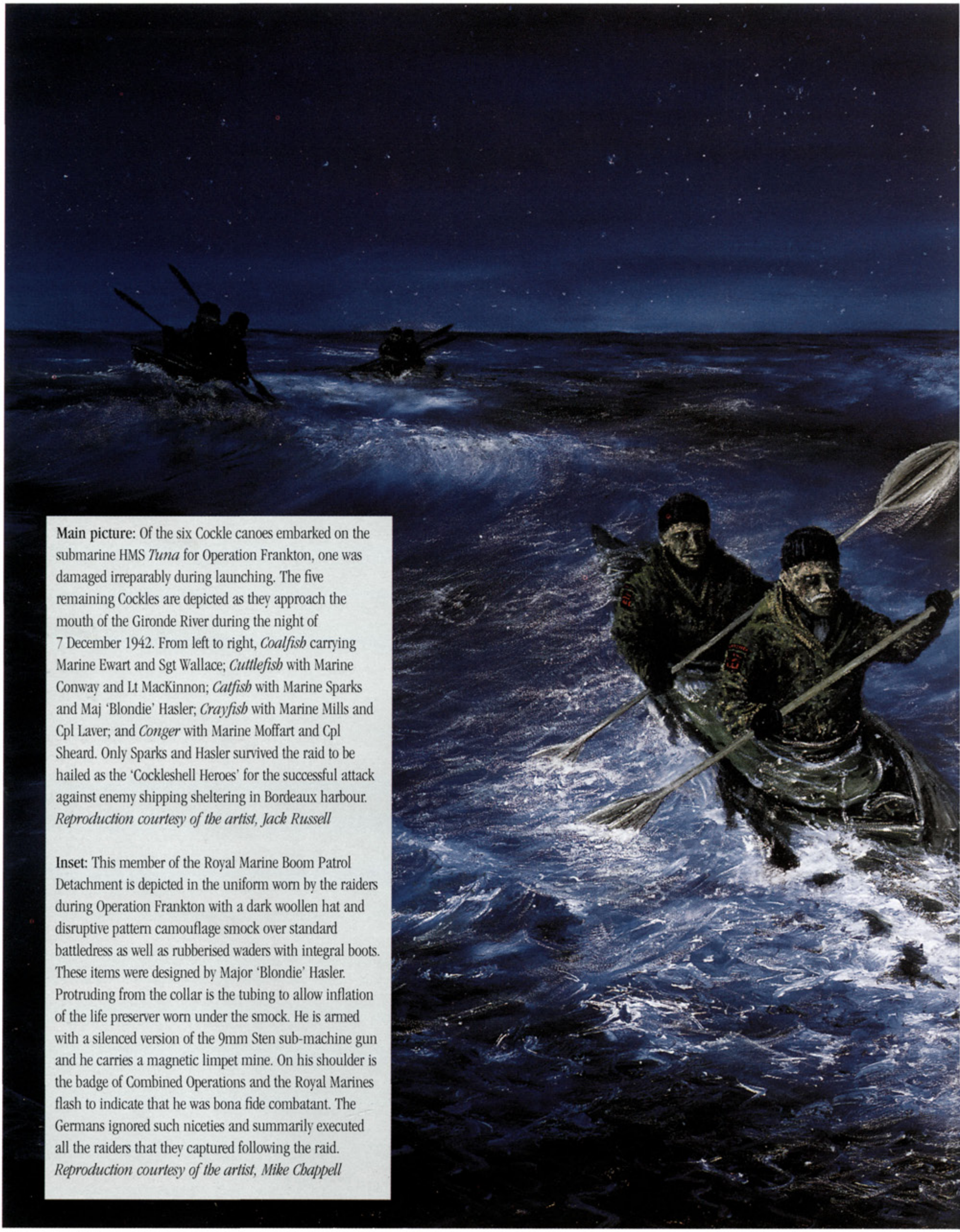
**Right:** Snipers used both binoculars and telescopes for detecting targets while concealed beneath their 3 feet by 3 feet 6 inch camouflage face veil with the No. 4 Mark 1* (T) rifle and No. 32 telescopic sight lying close by.

**Opposite, Left:** With a Thompson Submachine Gun M1928A1 slung over his shoulder, this Commando has the earlier version of the Bergen rucksack.

**Opposite, Right:** This Commando sergeant shows two of the most famous Commando weapons: the Tommy gun and Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife tucked into his gaiter.

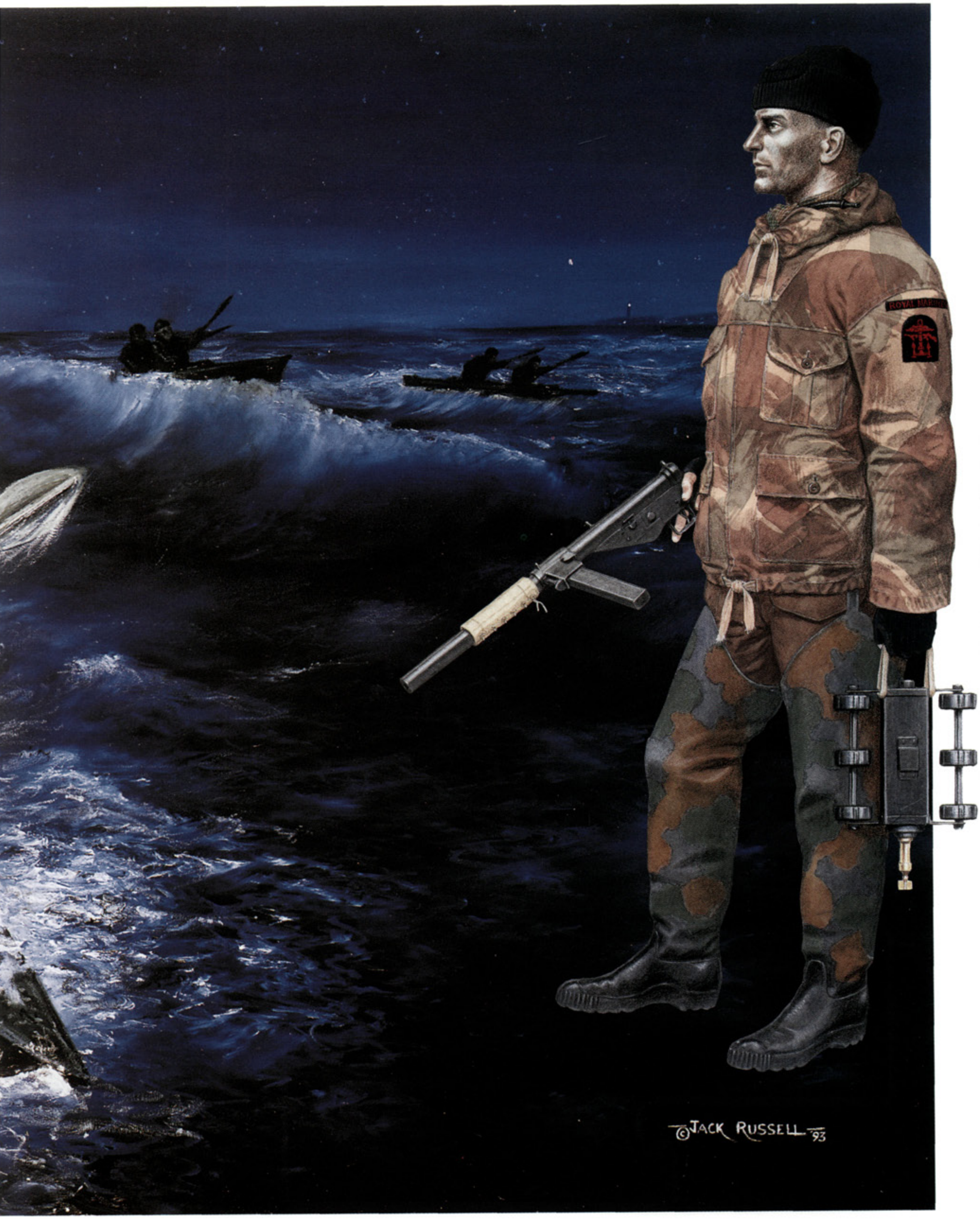






**Main picture:** Of the six Cockle canoes embarked on the submarine HMS *Tuna* for Operation Frankton, one was damaged irreparably during launching. The five remaining Cockles are depicted as they approach the mouth of the Gironde River during the night of 7 December 1942. From left to right, *Coalfish* carrying Marine Ewart and Sgt Wallace; *Cuttlefish* with Marine Conway and Lt MacKinnon; *Catfish* with Marine Sparks and Maj 'Blondie' Hasler; *Crayfish* with Marine Mills and Cpl Laver; and *Conger* with Marine Moffart and Cpl Sheard. Only Sparks and Hasler survived the raid to be hailed as the 'Cockleshell Heroes' for the successful attack against enemy shipping sheltering in Bordeaux harbour. *Reproduction courtesy of the artist, Jack Russell*

**Inset:** This member of the Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment is depicted in the uniform worn by the raiders during Operation Frankton with a dark woollen hat and disruptive pattern camouflage smock over standard battledress as well as rubberised waders with integral boots. These items were designed by Major 'Blondie' Hasler. Protruding from the collar is the tubing to allow inflation of the life preserver worn under the smock. He is armed with a silenced version of the 9mm Sten sub-machine gun and he carries a magnetic limpet mine. On his shoulder is the badge of Combined Operations and the Royal Marines flash to indicate that he was bona fide combatant. The Germans ignored such niceties and summarily executed all the raiders that they captured following the raid. *Reproduction courtesy of the artist, Mike Chappell*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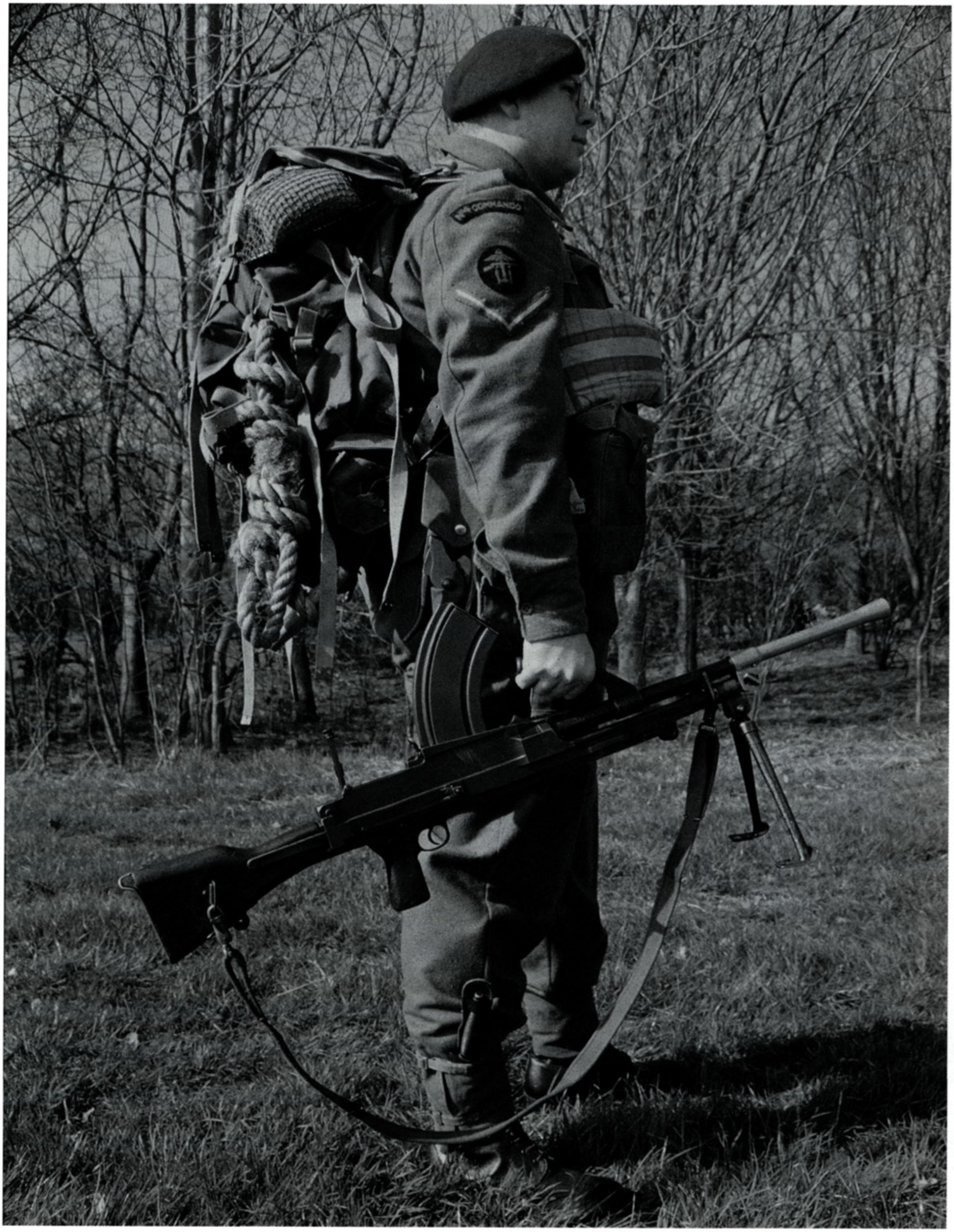
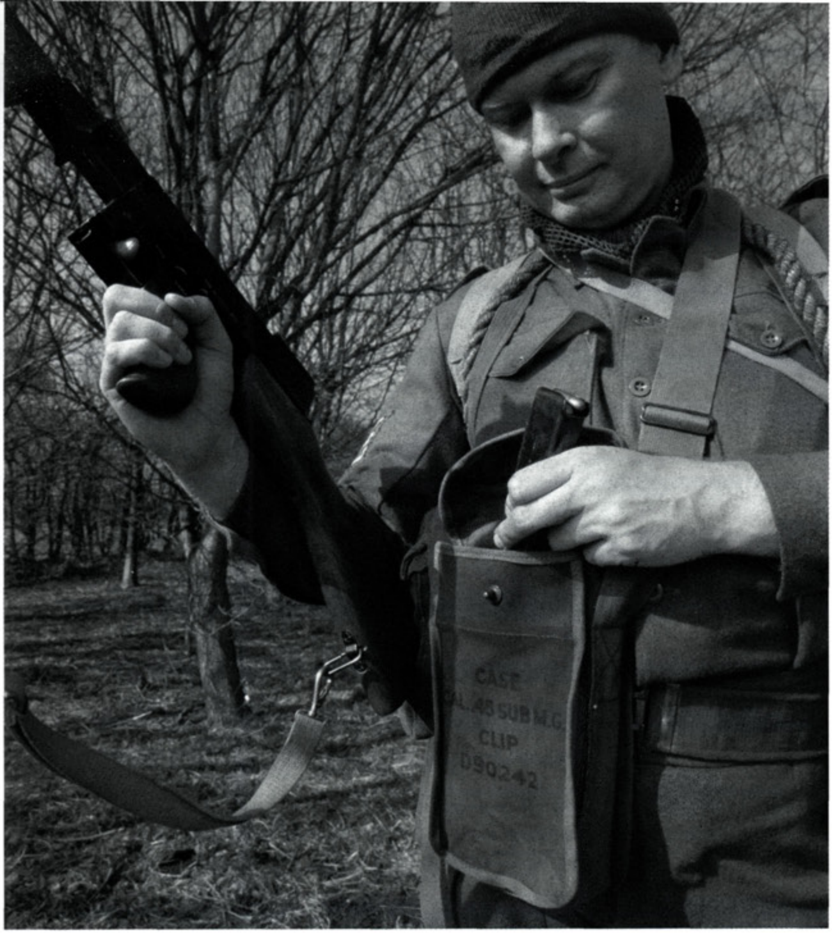
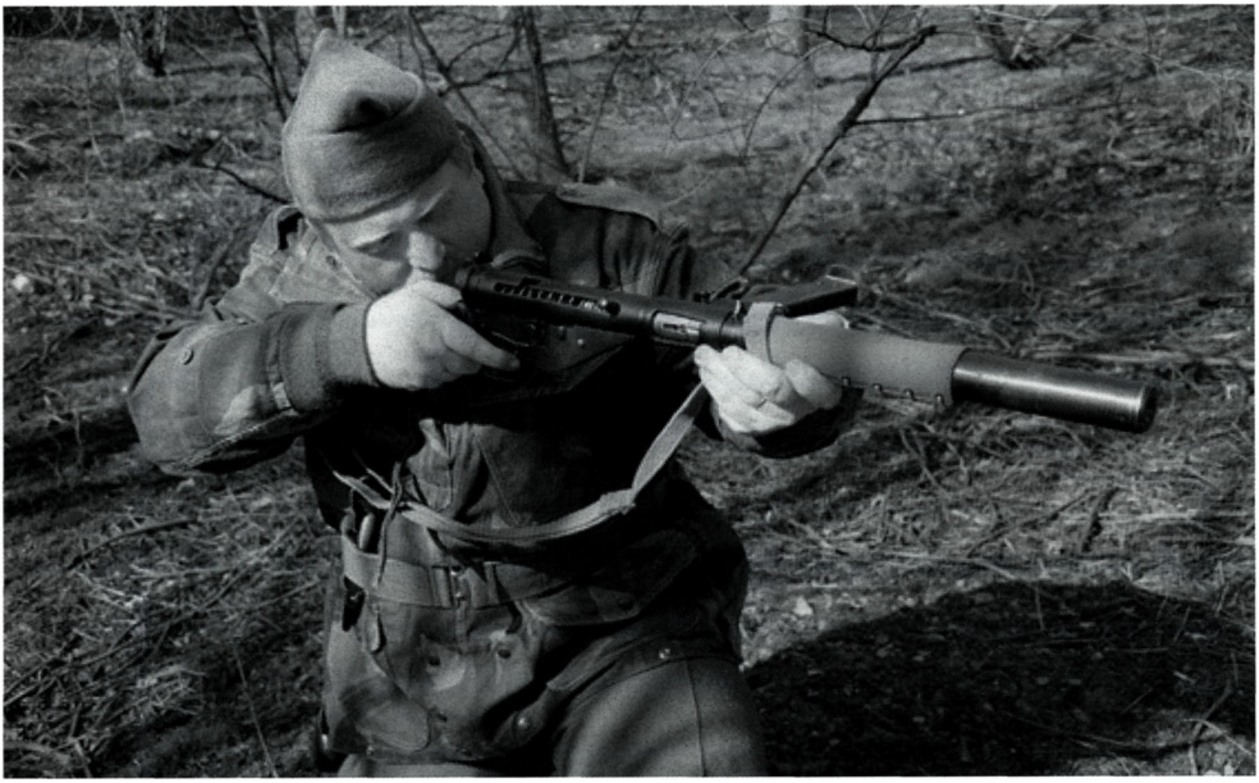

No. 6 COMMANDO



**Far left:** A Bren gunner displays the standard equipment for amphibious landings including a fully laden Bergen with steel helmet. The white object around his chest is a life preserver or 'water wings' as it was known.

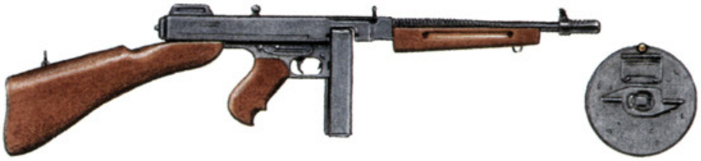
**Left:** The Thompson submachine gun was a popular Commando weapon throughout the war because of the power of its .45-calibre ACP round. In the early days, the 50-round drum magazine was used but it was not overly reliable and the 20-round box magazine was preferred.

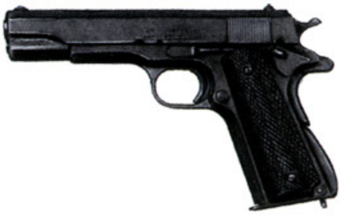
**Below:** The Commandos were issued with a silenced version of the Sten for the quiet despatch of sentries during a raid but it was unreliable and was superseded by the specially developed De Lisle Carbine fitted with an efficient silencer.



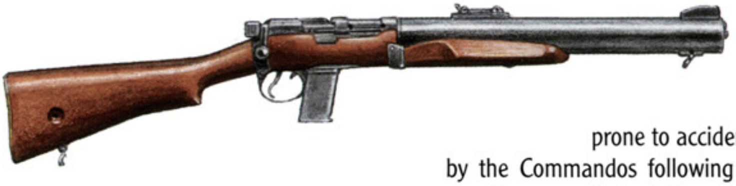
# WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT

At the time the Commandos were formed, the British Expeditionary Force had just been evacuated from Dunkirk where it had lost all its tanks and heavy equipment. The dejected troops returned with little more at best than their helmets and rifles. All types of weapons were in short supply and the Commandos were not a high priority as the threat of invasion intensified through the summer of 1940. Nevertheless, the Commandos scrounged whatever weapons they could, including half of the total number of Tommy guns available in Britain for the first cross-Channel raid. The Commandos have forever been associated with the Thompson submachine gun and the type illustrated (left) is the Model 1928 A1 or M1928A1 with beside it the 50-round drum magazine beloved of gangster movies which in the event was not favoured by Commandos as it was prone to jamming. They preferred the 20-round box magazines that were much easier to carry and also lighter as the Tommy gun was in any case a heavy weapon at 10½ pounds. The principal sidearm of the Commandos throughout the war was the Colt M1911A1 .45-inch calibre automatic pistol (illustrated left) and it was issued widely to all ranks, unlike in most line infantry units where pistols were reserved for officers. This American weapon fired the .45-inch ACP round so this meant that the Commandos had to carry only two types of ammunition into battle with the other being the .303-inch round of the standard British Army infantry weapons.

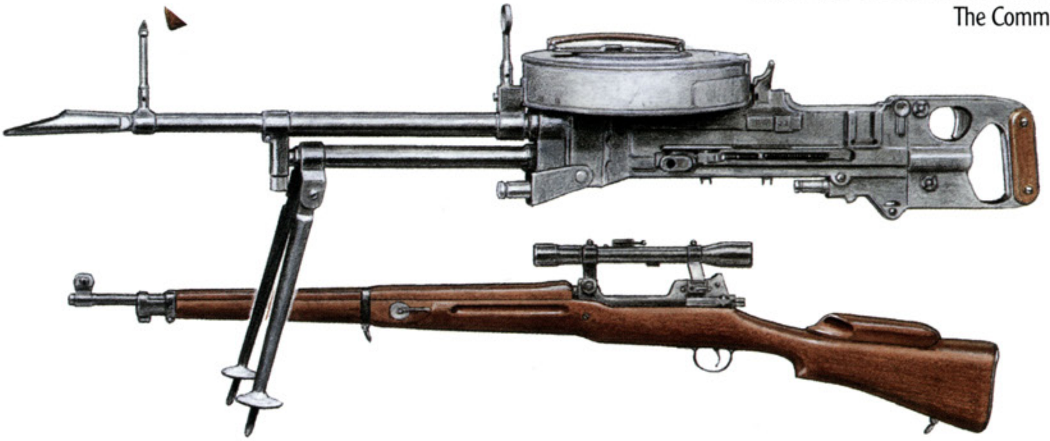




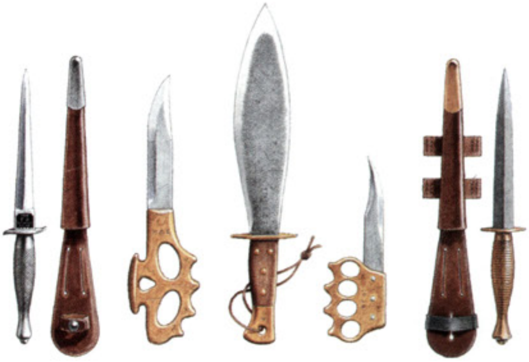
At the outset, most Commandos used the .303-inch No. 3 Short, Magazine, Lee-Enfield (SMLE). From 1942 onwards this was superseded by the No. 4 Rifle. The De Lisle Commando Carbine (below) was, as its name implies, specifically designed for the Commandos, in fact as a silenced weapon for close-quarter killing out to 400 yards during clandestine raids. The Commandos also used the silenced 9mm Sten gun but this required a different cartridge to their other weapons. It was also considered unreliable and prone to accidental discharges if dropped. Another unusual weapon used by the Commandos following the Normandy landings was the .303-inch Vickers 'K' machine gun (below) that was originally designed for the RAF for fighter planes. Accordingly, it had an extremely high rate of fire of 1,000 rounds a minute which the Commandos favoured but it consumed large quantities of ammunition – which was carried in 96-round drum magazines.



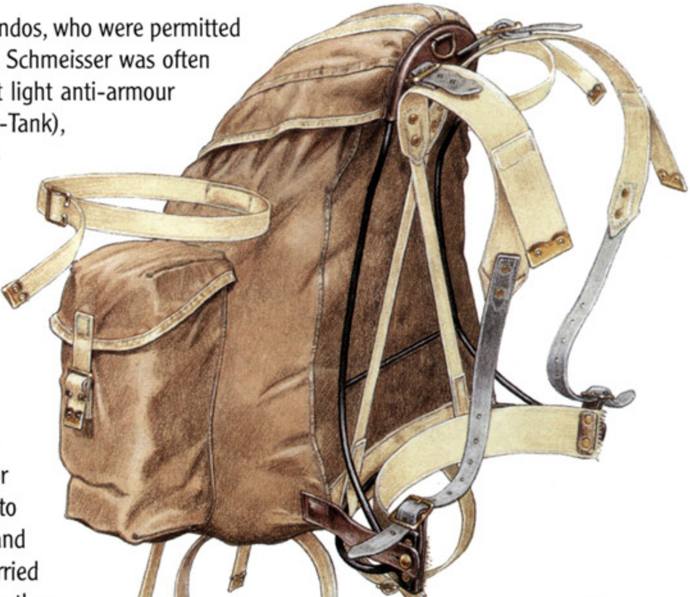
The Commandos employed snipers on a greater scale than standard units. Initially, they were issued with (below left) the Rifle, No. 3 Mark 1* (T), the T standing for Telescope, which was superseded by the No. 4 Mark 1 (T). The Commandos were renowned for the variety of edged weapons they carried into battle of which the



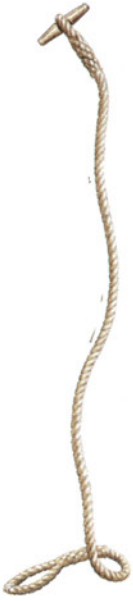
Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife was the most famous (see photo on page 30 and box on page 32). Capts Fairbairn and Sykes designed the weapon after serving in the Shanghai police in China. They became the leading unarmed combat instructors within the Commandos and the 'F-S Knife' is their enduring legacy and it remains the symbol worn to this day on the sleeves of specialised Army troops attached to the Royal Marine Commandos such as artillery and engineer personnel. The first pattern knife with its 8½-inch blade is shown in (right) and the later pattern with a 13-inch blade and scabbard (far right). The Middle East Commandos produced their own fighting knife known as the 'fanny' knuckle knife (second right). The most fearsome Commando edged weapon that was issued in the early days was also designed by Fairbairn and Sykes and was known as the Smatchett or 'Roman Sword' (third right). Another combined knuckleduster and knife was the BC41 Pattern (fourth right).

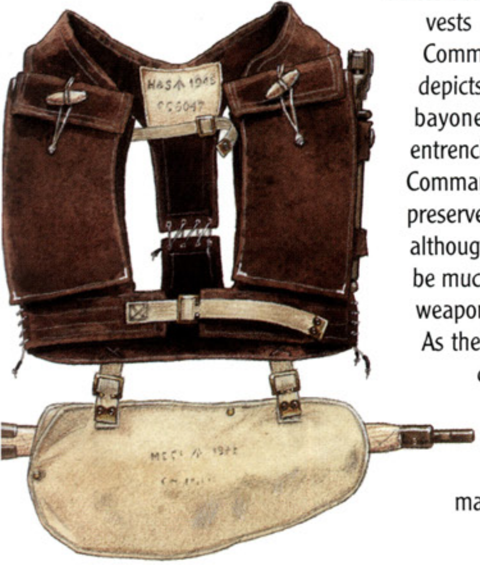


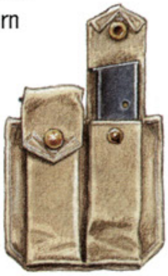
Captured German weapons were much used by the Commandos, who were permitted more leeway in this respect than line infantry units. The MP40 Schmeisser was often used in place of the inadequate Sten gun and the Panzerfaust light anti-armour weapon was preferred to the PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti-Tank), particularly for house clearing when the troops advanced into Germany.

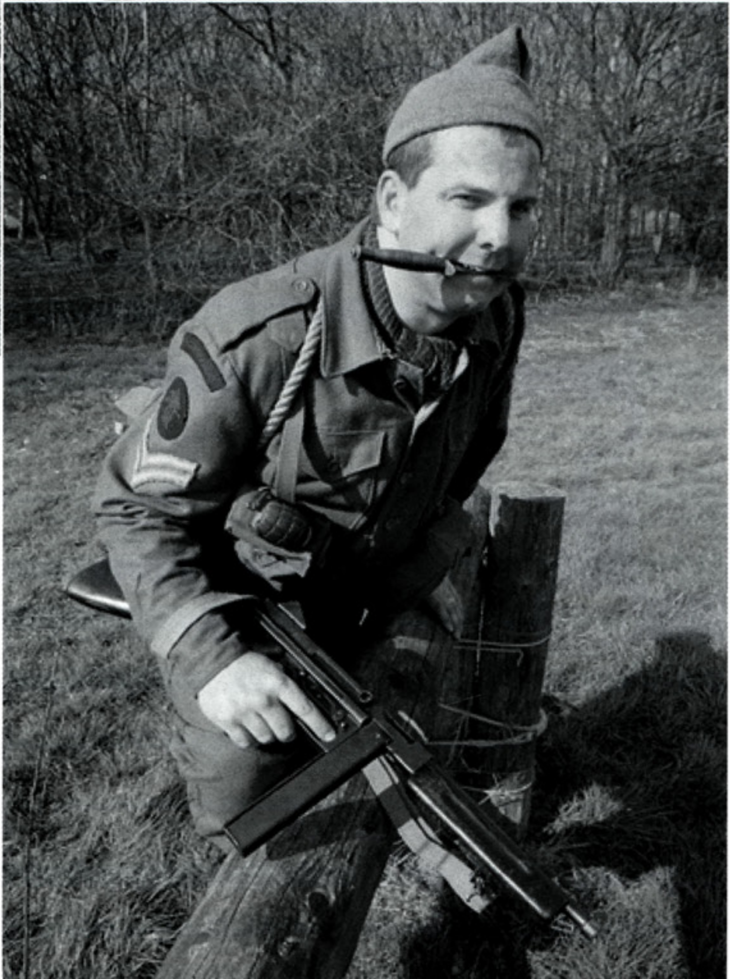


During raids any items that were not vital to the task in hand, such as anti-gas capes and respirators, were left behind and later discarded completely. The issue steel helmet was also seen as an encumbrance and was invariably replaced by the woollen cap comforter that became another icon of the Commandos. So too were the Bergen rucksack and the toggle rope. The Bergen (right) was of Norwegian origin and initially employed to carry demolition stores during raids but Commandos quickly acquired them for their own use as they could carry an extraordinary load thanks to the A-frame that distributed the weight onto the shoulders and hips for greater comfort. The toggle rope (below right) was carried by every Commando and these could be quickly connected together to make scaling ropes or bridges across obstacles. Various assault vests were designed for the Commandos during the war and (left) depicts the 'skeleton assault harness' with bayonet frog, ammunition pouches and entrenching tool. During seaborne assaults, Commandos were encouraged to wear life preservers such as the Royal Navy pattern although one wonders whether it would be much help to a man festooned with weapons and a 60-pound rucksack. As the main British users of the .45-calibre Colt automatic pistol, the Commandos were issued with special pouches for its seven-round magazines (right).









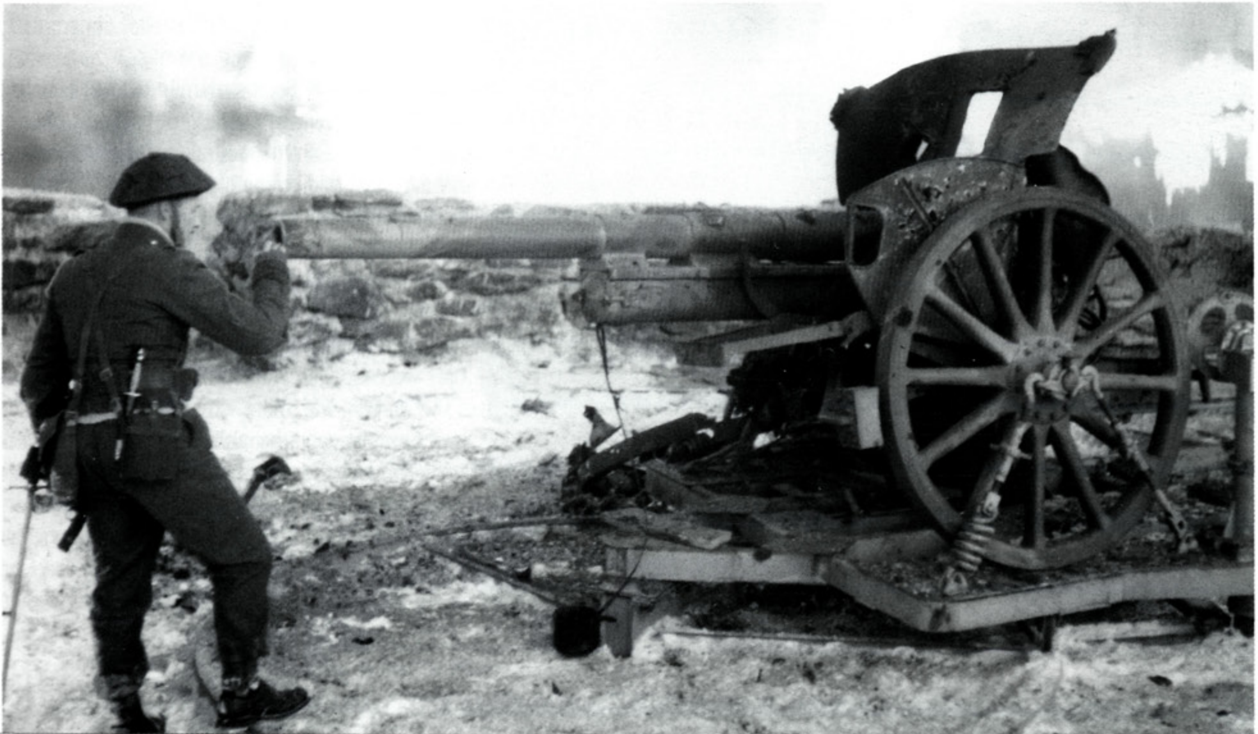
**Above:** A group of Commandos reorganise before their next action wearing a variety of late war uniforms.

**Left:** The enduring image of the Commando raider bedecked with cap comforter, Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife, toggle rope and Tommy gun – the tools of his deadly trade.

# PEOPLE

## JACK CHURCHILL (1898–1961)

Before the war Jack Churchill had been a model for Brylcream hair treatment advertisements but his good looks disguised his appetite for war and he won a Military Cross during the battle of France where he reputedly killed a German soldier with an arrow fired from a longbow. As the second-in-command of No.3 Commando during the raid on Vaagsø he won immortal fame and his nickname of 'Mad Jack' when he stood exposed on the bows of a landing craft during the assault on Maaloy Island playing the bagpipes under heavy German fire. As the boat touched ground, he casually passed his pipes to his batman, Guardsman Stretton, who handed him his Claymore and Churchill charged ashore waving his sword and 'shouting warlike cries' hotly pursued by one of his troop commanders, Capt Peter Young. Together they and No.3 Group quickly subdued the German coastal battery threatening the main landings at Vaagsø. During the action he was blown up by a demolition charge as he was 'liberating' a case of German wine. As he was borne from the field he instructed his batman to retrieve his bagpipes and the wine, which was quickly consumed – '…on the way home he was still very merry, and fortunately his wounds, if painful, were not too serious'. These exploits were witnessed by a Reuters News correspondent and gained extensive coverage in the newspapers of the time. Nevertheless, 'Mad Jack' Churchill was a truly professional soldier and he assumed



**Below:** With his Claymore sword at his side, Maj 'Mad Jack' Churchill inspects one of the artillery guns on the island of Maaloy that his troops of No. 2 Commando captured at the outset of the attack on Vaagsø. *IWM – N463*

**Right:** Wearing the characteristic Commando cap comforter, Lord Lovat confers with Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the C-in-C Dover, who masterminded the evacuation of the BEF at Dunkirk. At this time, Lord Lovat was the CO of No. 4 Commando. He led the successful raid against the Hess battery at Varengeville-sur-Mer during Operation Cauldron. *CMC*

command of No.2 Commando, training them to the highest level prior to their deployment to the Mediterranean for the invasion of Italy when Robert Laycock noted – 'They look fit and well and are delighted to be with us. Jack brought his bagpipes and his bow and arrows'. Together with No.41 (Royal Marine) Commando, No.2 Commando was involved in heavy fighting during the landings at Salerno in September 1943 when they suffered severe casualties against determined German opposition. At the village of Pigoletti, Churchill led the attack, sword in hand, and captured several prisoners personally. After a quick interrogation at sword point, the prisoners divulged the password for the night and the attack continued until Churchill had captured almost 40 prisoners and a regimental aid post intact. He was subsequently awarded the DSO and when the divisional general asked why he carried a sword, Churchill replied – 'In my opinion, sir, any officer who goes into action without his sword is improperly dressed.' After recuperation and reinforcement, Jack Churchill and No.2 Commando moved to the Adriatic Sea to support Tito's partisans fighting the Germans in Yugoslavia by raiding the Nazi occupied islands along the Dalmatian coast. By mid-1944, No.2 Commando was based on the island of Vis where the officers 'will long remember the famous cocktails which he [Churchill] concocted on the piano in the corner of the tiny little room.' After a concerted German airborne assault on Tito's Headquarters, the Commandos were directed to mount diversionary raids to relieve the pressure on the partisans. It was decided to attack the German garrison on the beautiful island of Brac. The attack began on 2 June against fierce opposition with co-ordinated assaults by various Commando units and partisans. The attack on Point 622 was particularly severe and, after suffering heavy Commando casualties, Churchill led another assault on the hill. After gaining the summit of the hill, the fighting continued until Churchill had but one magazine left for his carbine while his fellow Commandos were completely out of ammunition and he alone remained unwounded. Churchill noted – 'Our position was growing precarious.' There was one thing to do. He pumped up his bagpipes in the hope that reinforcements would rush to the sound of the pipes as he played 'Will ye no come back again?' But the next arrivals on Point 622 were the Germans and Churchill was wounded in the head by a grenade fragment. For Churchill, the war was over while his bagpipes and sword were taken as trophies of war and put on display in Vienna.

## LORD LOVAT (1911–1995)

The tall, aristocratic Lord Lovat came from a famous Scottish family with a long and distinguished military heritage. The family seat at Inverailot Castle on the shores of Loch Ailort in the Western Highlands became an important Commando training area. As an early member of No.4 Commando, he conducted his first raid on the night of 21/22 April 1941 against Hardelot, which, like many of the first Commando raids, was not without incident; Lovat noted – '...that a hazardous undertaking, in the sense that all intelligence was lacking, has been successfully negotiated, not through any ability on the Commando's part, but because the opposition encountered was either half-hearted or badly trained.' He also noted that many of the Commandos had been firing high in the dark and that many weapons had malfunctioned because they were clogged with sand while torches did not work because they were waterlogged. The answer was more extensive training and by 1942 Lord Lovat was in command of No. 4 Commando in the rank of Lt Colonel. His attack against the 'Hess Battery' during the Dieppe raid was the only outright success of the whole operation and his unit suffered the fewest casualties. After the guns of the battery were destroyed, all those of No.4 Commando that had been killed in action were laid together below the battery flagpole and the hated Nazi swastika was replaced with the Union Flag to fly triumphantly over the British dead. In 1944, Brigadier the Lord Lovat was in command of No.1 Special Service Brigade and he led his troops ashore on D-Day accompanied by his personal piper. His task was to relieve the paratroopers of 6TH Airborne Division that had captured the bridges across the Orne River and Caen Canal. This he duly did with 'his piper beside him playing a cheerful tune' and the famous red and green berets mingled in a well-found victory. On 12 June, Lord Lovat was seriously wounded as the Commandos and Paratroopers attacked the village of Bréville. As he was being carried from the field, he penned a message to his men – 'I have become a casualty but I can rely on you not to take one step back. You are making history'.

## JOHN DURNFORD-SLATER (1909-)

Maj John Durnford-Slater was one of the founder members of No.3 Commando, the first Commando unit to be formed, and participated in the second Commando raid to be launched, which occurred on 14/15 July 1940 against the island of Guernsey, codenamed Operation Ambassador. In conjunction with No.11 Independent Company, 40 men of No.3 Commando under his command landed at Moulin Huet Bay from the destroyer HMS ***Scimitar***. No enemy were encountered and in his own words the raid was 'a very amateurish affair from which we were fortunate to return…[we] achieved very little, but learnt a good deal'. Intensive training within No.3 Commando followed that proved fruitful during Operation Claymore in the successful raid against the Lofoten Islands on 4 March 1941. During Operation Archery, as a Lt. Col. in command of the landing forces ashore, he personally led Group 2 of No.3 Commando during the attack on Vaagsø and the demolition of the fish-oil factories. Durnford-Slater was the first Commando ashore and he immediately set up his HQ as his Commandos attacked the town but the surrounding hills made radio communications impossible so he strode into Vaagsø to determine the fate of his men. As he rushed forward a grenade exploded in his path, seriously wounding his orderly. As Germen resistance increased, he deployed his men with great skill, testing his officers and NCOs to the utmost and observing their actions keenly. Anyone that did not come up to his exacting

**Above:** Three famous Commandos confer during the campaign in Normandy. From left to right, Capt Charles Head, the adjutant of No. 3 Commando, Brig John Durnford-Slater, Deputy Commander Combined Operations and Lt-Col Peter Young, CO No. 3 Commando. Peter Young was one of the most gallant and successful Commando leaders of World War 2. He ended the war as a brigadier with one DSO and three MCs. *CMC*

demands were summarily RTU'd after the action. After the demolition of the objectives, he personally orchestrated the withdrawal to the landing craft, leading knots of Commandos through burning buildings to avoid the worst of the German fire. For his leadership during the Vaagsø raid, Durnford-Slater was awarded the DSO. As the CO of No.3 Commando for the raid on Dieppe in August 1942, his force met with a similar disastrous fate as the rest of the operation when his landing craft were widely scattered following an encounter with the Kriegsmarine in mid-Channel. Of the 23 landing craft carrying No.3 Commando, only seven got to France where four were sunk or stranded on rocks but a group of his men were able to neutralise the 'Goebbels Battery' on the left flank of the main landings. In July 1943, he led the attack by No.3 Commando during the invasion of Sicily against a coastal battery on Pachino Peninsula to make up for the failure of Dieppe. He was awarded the DSO for his actions at the battle of Termoli at the Ponte del Malati that was subsequently renamed Commando Bridge; a name that continues to this day. In September, he was the commander of the Special Service Brigade during Operation Avalanche and the invasion of mainland Italy. During 1944, in the rank of brigadier, he became the second-in-command of all Commando units of the Special Service Group under Maj Gen Robert Sturges. After the Normandy landings, he commanded a tactical HQ of the SS Group, which was attached to HQ Second British Army and it is in that capacity that he is shown in the accompanying photograph with another renowned Commando, Peter Young.

## ROBERT LAYCOCK (1907–1968)

After serving in the Royal Horse Guards, Capt Robert Laycock was appointed to the GHQ Middle East as an Anti-Gas Staff Officer whereupon he promptly volunteered for the Commandos and was tasked with raising No.8 Commando from the Household Cavalry and other units in London District. As a Lt Col, Laycock commanded No.8 Commando and then became deputy commander of the Special Service Brigade. As a brigadier he was sent to the Middle East in January 1941 to create a Commando formation known as 'Layforce', comprising '100 officers and 1,500 other ranks with one staff officer, a note book and eight wireless sets which nobody could work' – see Layforce and the Middle East Commandos pp. 22-25. After the failure of Operation Flipper, Laycock undertook a heroic march across the desert in company with Sgt Jack Terry towards British lines eating little more than berries until aided by some friendly Senussi tribesmen. They eventually met up with British forces after a trek of 41 days. It was Christmas Day 1941 and as he entered the officers mess, Laycock was upbraided for being an hour and 20 minutes late for Christmas dinner. Meanwhile, Jack Terry had parted company with Laycock. Throughout their wanderings, Laycock had read repeatedly from the only book he had with him which was 'The Wind in the Willows'. On reaching British lines, Terry was heard to mutter – 'Thank God I shan't have to hear any more about that bloody Mr Toad!' Within the week, Laycock was ordered to return to England to take command of the Special Service Brigade. In April 1943, the brigade was split between Laycock and Lord Lovat and the former oversaw the Commando operations for the invasions of Sicily and Italy. Laycock was instrumental in the major enlargement and reorganisation of the Commandos prior to D-Day with the creation of the Special Service Group under the command of Maj Gen Robert Sturges. It was Laycock's belief that the Commandos should be more self-sufficient with heavier integral weapons to fulfil the role of assault infantry. When Lord Mountbatten became Supreme Allied Commander in South East Asia, Maj Gen Robert Laycock succeeded him as the Chief of Combined Operations.

## PETER YOUNG (1915–1988)

Like 'Mad Jack' Churchill, Peter Young was one of the legendary fighting Commandos of World War 2. As a former bank clerk, Young did not fit the image of tough Commando but he was fearless in battle and fought in virtually every theatre of operations from Vaagsø to the Arakan. He was commissioned in 1939 as a 2ND Lt in the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment and was wounded during the evacuation from Dunkirk. After recuperation, he joined No.3 Commando and took part in the earliest Commando raids. He won the first of his three Military Crosses for his actions during the savage street-fighting in Vaagsø after his troop had completed the capture of the island of Maaloy with 'Mad Jack' Churchill. After a period on the staff at Combined Operations HQ, he became second-in-command of No.3 Commando and took part in the Dieppe Raid. With just 18 survivors of his troop on landing below the objective of the coastal guns of the 'Goebbels Battery', he managed to take his raiding force up the cliffs on a network of barbed wire which, as he put it, 'an over-conscientious German officer had inadvertently provided for them to walk on'. Young was the only Commando officer to reach his objective and bring back all his men. At one point, when they were approaching enemy machine-guns through a cornfield, he encouraged his soldiers by telling them not to worry about bullets as standing corn made an effective protection. Fortunately, he was able to withdraw to the beach with all his men. He was awarded a DSO for his part in this raid. In 1943, at Agnone in Sicily he was awarded a Bar to his MC and then, when commanding No.3 Commando in raids in Italy, received a second Bar. In 1944 he fought in Normandy, serving with distinction in the D-Day landings before being posted to the Arakan, Burma. A fellow officer recalls seeing Young's Commandos under attack from an apparently endless number of Japanese at Kangaw and sending a message asking Young if he would like reinforcements. 'No thanks,' came back the message. 'We can see this lot off all right.' And he did. In 1945 Young was promoted to command 1 Commando Brigade in Burma, and was generally acknowledged to be outstanding. From Second Lieutenant to Brigadier in six years was a remarkable achievement in itself but at the same time to be awarded a DSO and three MCs is the stuff of legends.

**Below:** The Small Scale Raiding Force was given the codename of No. 62 Commando because it contained many Commando personnel. One of the most legendary Commandos was Anders 'Andy' Lassen, a former Danish merchant seaman. He is shown at the extreme right of this group of the Small Scale Raiding Force undergoing training in Cumberland during the summer of 1942. Lassen was an expert with the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife and won the Military Cross no less than three times. He subsequently joined the Special Boat Section and was killed at Lake Comacchio in April 1945 in an action for which he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, the first time that this medal was awarded to a foreign national. *CMC*

# POSTWAR

The disbanding of the Commando units began in November 1945 and their personnel were either demobilised or returned to their parent regiments. Few of the latter were welcomed back with open arms as service with the Commandos was seen as a form of disloyalty in many regiments. Military careers suffered accordingly and many former Commandos chose to leave the Army in the coming years taking with them their valuable wartime expertise. Within months only Nos. 1 and 5 Commandos of 3 Commando Brigade remained in being, as garrison troops in Hong Kong. The majority of the Royal Marine Commandos were also disbanded with Nos. 40 and 43 in January 1946 and Nos. 41, 46, 47 and 48 in February. At the same time, the remaining RM Commandos were redesignated Commandos Royal Marines. Headquarters Commando Group and ancillary units such as the CBTC at Achnacarry were closed down in March. On 31 January 1946, 45 Commando RM set sail for Hong Kong to relieve Nos. 1 and 5 Commandos which were amalgamated when the Royal Marines arrived to join 3 Commando Brigade. No. 1/5 Commando was disbanded in January 1947 and the Army Commandos were no more.

**Below:** In the postwar years, the role of amphibious warfare has passed to the Royal Marines. During the 1970s, 3 Commando Brigade RM became specialists in Arctic warfare as well, with the role of defending NATO's northern flank in Norway; these were skills that proved invaluable during the Falklands campaign of 1982. *Royal Marines*

However, 3 Commando Brigade lived on at the direction of the Commandant General Royal Marines, General Sir Thomas Hunton, and was now designated 3 Commando Brigade RM. He also wished to reflect the theatres of operations of the wartime Royal Marine Commandos within the Special Service/Commando Brigades. Accordingly, 42 Commando RM represented the Royal Marine Commandos of the old 3 Commando Brigade which had fought in the Arakan and the Far East. 44 Commando RM was renumbered as 'Forty' to represent 2 Commando Brigade which fought in the Mediterranean and 45 Commando RM for those who fought in northwest Europe. By the end of 1946, all three Royal Marine Commando units were serving in Hong Kong. In May 1947, 3 Commando Brigade RM moved to Malta from where its units served in Palestine and the Suez Canal Zone. All three Commandos were involved in the difficult withdrawal from Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel with 40 Commando RM being the last British Army unit to leave Haifa on 30 June 1948. From a wartime strength of over 74,000 men, the Corps of Royal Marines was by now reduced to 13,000, of whom 2,200 were in 3 Commando Brigade. By 1949 the Government was anxious to reduce defence costs further and the Harwell Committee proposed that the Royal Marines be disbanded; a move fought bitterly by the Admiralty but only at the cost of more manpower.

From June 1950 to March 1952, 3 Commando Brigade deployed to the Far East for the Malayan Emergency to undertake counter-terrorism operations. All three units were widely involved in jungle warfare. They killed 171 Communist Terrorists and captured a further 50 at a cost of 30 dead. Meanwhile, 41 Commando RM was reformed on 16 August 1950 following the North Korean invasion of the Republic of Korea on 25 June 1950. Once deployed, 41 (Independent) Commando joined the US Army Special Raiding Force and conducted several classic Commando raids along the west coast of Korea. In November it came under command of 1st (US) Marine Division and fought in the epic breakout at Hagaru-ri for which it was awarded a US Presidential Citation. 41 (Independent) Commando was disbanded in February 1952.

**Above:** The Royal Marines were among the first units to be committed on the streets of Ulster in 1969 where for the next 30 years they fought an effective counter-terrorism campaign. *Royal Marines*

For the next 20 years, the Royal Marine Commandos fought in numerous brushfire wars and counter-insurgency operations as Britain conducted its long and difficult withdrawal from Empire – Aden, Borneo, Cyprus and elsewhere, a veritable alphabet of bitter conflicts that taxed the Commandos to the full but never found them wanting. At Suez in November 1956 the Royal Marines spearheaded the Anglo-French seaborne assault to reclaim the Suez Canal after it was nationalised by the Egyptian government. 40 and 42 Commandos landed over the beaches of Port Said from landing craft in the traditional manner while 45 Commando conducted the first helicopter air assault in warfare. Another strategic innovation was the introduction of the dedicated Commando carriers, HMS *Albion* and *Bulwark*, in 1960. Each was capable of deploying a RM Commando with supporting artillery and helicopters to land the troops anywhere in the world. One was usually stationed in the Mediterranean and one in the Far East. At the same time, 41 and 43 Commandos were reactivated to expand the flexibility and capabilities of the Royal Marines.

During the 1960s the Royal Marines fought extensively in the Middle and Far East and by the end of the decade there were 633 officers and 7,515 men serving in the Corps of Royal Marines. The 1970s saw the emergence of a new conflict closer to home in Northern Ireland that was to absorb the British Army and the Royal Marines for the next 30 years. Emergency four-month and longer residential tours became a regular irksome duty to all Commandos, yet they provided invaluable training and combat experience for a generation of soldiers, sailors and marines. The 1970s saw another new theatre of operations for the Royal Marines with the commitment of 3 Commando Brigade to Norway to protect NATO's northern flank. The first deployment by 45 Commando took place in January 1970 and thereafter the Royal Marines became

specialists in Arctic warfare with regular deployments every year. In July 1974, 40 Commando was despatched to Cyprus as the British Army's rapid-deployment 'Spearhead Battalion' to protect British bases on the island following the Turkish invasion. Many tours followed to the island as United Nations Peacekeeping forces, a role that was to become ever more common in the years to come.

On 2 April 1982 Argentine troops invaded the British sovereign territory of the Falkland Islands deep in the South Atlantic. Defending the islands were just 67 Royal Marines of Naval Party 8901. They fought tenaciously, inflicting many casualties on the Argentine troops without loss to themselves, before being ordered to surrender by the civilian governor. The Falkland Islands are situated only 400 miles from the South American mainland but 8,000 miles from Britain. Any military operation to retake the islands was fraught with hazard and many military observers deemed it to be impossible. The task fell predominately to 3 Commando Brigade, augmented by the Parachute Regiment and other specialised troops. Within days of the invasion a Royal Navy Task Force sailed for the South Atlantic carrying the men of 40, 42 and 45 Commandos RM and all the supporting units of 3 Commando Brigade. Together with the Paras, they were at the forefront of the seaborne landings at San Carlos, codenamed Operation Sutton. Once 3 Commando Brigade was safely ashore, the Royal Marines began their epic 'yomp' across East Falkland towards the capital of Port Stanley in atrocious weather conditions. Both 42 and 45 Commandos fought several ferocious night battles against heavily defended Argentine positions that inevitably ended in vicious hand-to-hand combat – Mount Kent, Mount Harriet, Two Sisters, Mount Challenger – innocuous names that brought both death and glory to the Royal Marines. The Falklands War was a complete vindication of the role of the Royal Marines, if such were still required.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, it was hoped that the world would become a safer place with the end of the Cold War. It was not to be. In 1990, Royal Marine units deployed to the Gulf to participate in Operation Granby to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait. After the war, the Royal Marines conducted Operation Haven to protect the Kurds along the Iraqi/Turkish border. The break-up of Yugoslavia brought yet another theatre for extended peacekeeping operations through the 1990s culminating, as the new millennium dawned, in the Kosovo campaign to curtail the ethnic cleansing of the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosovic. The year 2000 also saw the Royal Marines deployed to Sierra Leone to restore law and order under the codename Operation Palliser.

Africa was followed by Afghanistan and Operation Jacana with 45 Commando conducting a difficult campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the continuing war against international terrorism. Yet sterner tests lay ahead with the war to liberate Iraq from the vicious regime of Saddam Hussein. Once again the Royal Marine Commandos were in the vanguard of the assault and in the thick of the fighting throughout the campaign. Britain's Sea Soldiers were formed more than 300 years ago and today the Royal Marines are recognised as one of the world's elite fighting forces: a worthy legacy for the wartime Commandos who first wore the Green Beret with pride. But the task goes on – *Per Mare, Per Terram.*

**Above:** The Royal Marines are the heirs to many of the specialised Commando units of World War II that now include the Arctic and Mountain Warfare Cadre and the Special Boat Service. Another unit is the 'Comacchio Group', named after the famous 1945 battle in Italy, which is tasked with protecting the Clyde Submarine Base at Faslane in Scotland where the Royal Navy's nuclear submarines are replenished between their clandestine patrols. *Royal Marines*

**Above right:** Peacekeeping and peace support missions now absorb considerable time and resources within the British armed forces, such as Operation Haven in northern Iraq following the Gulf War of 1991. Here, Marines of 45 Commando RM use Supacat All Terrain Vehicles to patrol the Kurdish enclave in Iraq. *Royal Marines*

**Below right:** The primary role of the Marines remains assault from the sea, be it by boat, landing craft, hovercraft or helicopter. All were employed at the outset of the war in Iraq in 2003. *Royal Marines*

72 KG 30
72 KG 34
45 Commando RM OP HAVEN

# ASSESSMENT

The Commandos were born in the dark days of 1940 when Britain stood alone against the might of Nazi Germany. Within weeks of their formation they conducted their first daring raid against occupied Europe. Another 146 Commando raids followed before peace was achieved in August 1945 with the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. In each and every one of them the Commandos faced heavy odds as they set forth 'to pluck bright honour from the pale-fac'd moon' from the cold wastes of the Arctic Circle to the fetid mangrove swamps of the Arakan. In the early years of the war, the Commandos were one of the few means for the British Empire to strike back at a powerful enemy that held sway from the Pyrenees to the Urals and from Trondheim to Tripoli. Their deeds thrilled and encouraged a deprived and embattled population while the armies of America and the British Empire were formed and trained for the greatest seaborne invasion in history to liberate Nazi-occupied Europe.

**Below:** Men returning from Dieppe. Although the raid led to a terrible loss of life, it taught the Allies significant lessons about the size of the task they would have to undertake to invade Europe. *IWM – N463*

Above: HQ Group during Operation Impact when No. 40 RM Commando captured Commando Bridge over the Renate Canal on 11 April 1945 during the decisive battle for Lake Comacchio in Italy (see box page 62). *CMC*

The Commandos played a vital role in this gigantic enterprise from small-scale raids for intelligence gathering to the tragic dress rehearsal for D-Day at Dieppe and with classic sabotage missions ranging from the destruction of the Normandie Dock at St Nazaire to the tiny force of Cockleshell Heroes that sneaked into the port of Bordeaux to sow devastation and confusion among a hated enemy. Operation Frankton epitomised the dedication and the courage of the individual raider that made up the Commandos, be they Army or Royal Marine.

Highly trained, motivated and willing to go that extra mile to achieve the objective, they were an elite fighting force but such success did not come cheap. The casualty rate was often high, not to say grievous – 50 per cent at St Nazaire, 60 per cent at Dieppe, 80 per cent for the Cockleshell Heroes. Furthermore, the Commandos faced hostile opposition from quarters other than the enemy. From the outset, there were factions in the military hierarchy that were deeply suspicious of the Commandos and not without cause. The call for volunteers for 'duties of a hazardous nature' drew a ready response from adventurous and committed men who were serving in every regiment and corps of the British Army. It cannot be denied that, by depriving the line infantry of some of the brightest and the best officers and NCOs, the British Army as a whole lacked the level of expertise and professionalism that the German Army displayed throughout World War II. Arguably this cost the British Army a greater number of casualties on the battlefield than the Commandos saved.

The Germans never felt the need for the multitude of special forces that were created by the British but this is no doubt a reflection of national characteristics. The gifted amateur prevailing in the face of fearful odds but without exceptional professionalism is a familiar and well-liked British archetype. Many of these Special Forces units were the creation of like-minded individuals, often of an eccentric nature, who were determined to fight the enemy by any means possible. Men such as 'Blondie' Hasler, 'Jumbo' Courtney and David Stirling had a vision of small bands of raiders striking far behind enemy lines to devastating effect. These achieved spectacular results in the early years of the war. The larger raids such as Vaagsø and St Nazaire were great successes, both militarily in tying down thousands of German troops and psychologically in boosting Allied morale in the dark days of the war.

After the disaster of Dieppe, the role of the Commandos changed fundamentally from that of raiders to assault troops in opposed amphibious landings. On several occasions they were misused as standard line infantry in subsequent operations inland where they sometimes suffered heavy casualties for lack of integral support weapons and sufficient firepower. All these problems of equipment and employment were addressed in time for D-Day in June 1944 when thousands of airborne troops and Commandos, both Army and Royal Marines, spearheaded the largest seaborne invasion in history. The very success of Operation Overlord was a testament to their determination and fighting skills. These were the traits that marked out the Commandos as an elite fighting force which, despite official opposition from the outset and in the immediate postwar years, was to remain a vital component of Britain's armed forces. The concept of Combined Operations was born more than 60 years ago and it has become the standard for all military operations today. Similarly, the ethos of the Commandos is as valid today as it ever was and the Commandos of World War II would readily recognise their present day counterparts.

# REFERENCE

## INTERNET SITES

www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk

Housed in the former Officers Mess at Southsea, the Royal Marines Museum recounts the story of the Corps from its formation in 1664 to date. There is also a Combined Operations Museum at Inverarary in Scotland – www.quebec-marine.co.uk

www.djrowlands.supanet.com

As one of the foremost military artists of today, David Rowlands has covered many of the British Army's recent campaigns and produced numerous action paintings of which his 'St Nazaire' reproduced in this book on page 33 is a fine example. For more information on David Rowlands' work see his website.

www.jackrussell.co.uk

Jack Russell Gallery, 41 High Street, Chipping Sodbury, South Gloucestershire, BS37 6BA

The Gloucestershire and England wicketkeeper is also a fine artist with several important military paintings to his credit, including 'The Cockleshell Heroes' which was created with the help of Bill Sparks and is reproduced in this book on page 74–75. Prints of the painting may be obtained from the above address.

www.combinedops.com

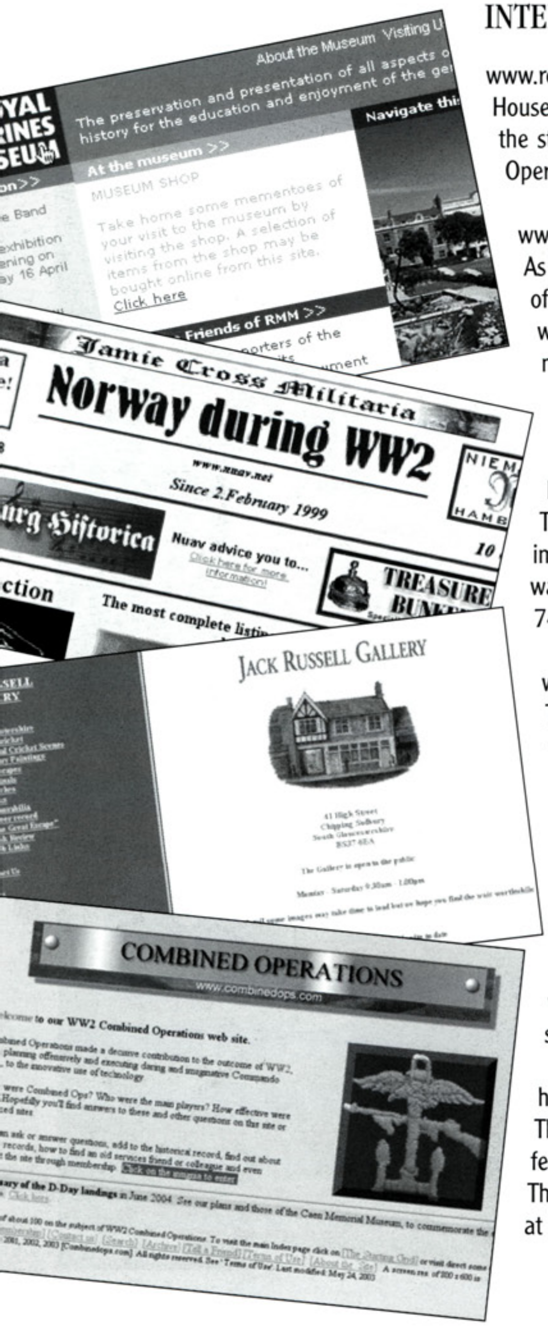
This is a good starting point for any web search for the Commandos. In particular this site has histories of Nos. 4, 5 and 11 Commandos; the last has a fine account of Operation Flipper – the assassination attempt against General Erwin Rommel. This site also has accounts of several Commando raids and the exploits of the Small Scale Raiding Force. There are links to many other sites including:

www.4commando.org.uk

This is the site of the 4 Commando World War II Re-enactment Group whose members have a remarkable collection of original Commando uniforms, weapons, equipment and memorabilia. The group gives demonstrations at military shows across the country. Several of its members are featured in this book.

http://home.wxs.nl

There are some interesting articles at the site of the Dutch Commandos, including features on Royal Navy Commandos and the Fairbairn-Sykes Commando dagger. There are also accounts of Nos. 4 and 5 Commandos and citations for the VC winners at St Nazaire during Operation Jubilee.



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www.jubilee.freehomepage.com
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A vivid, personal account of the No. 4 Commando raid at Dieppe.

www.nuav.net
Covers Combined Operations in Norway, as does www.combined-operations.com

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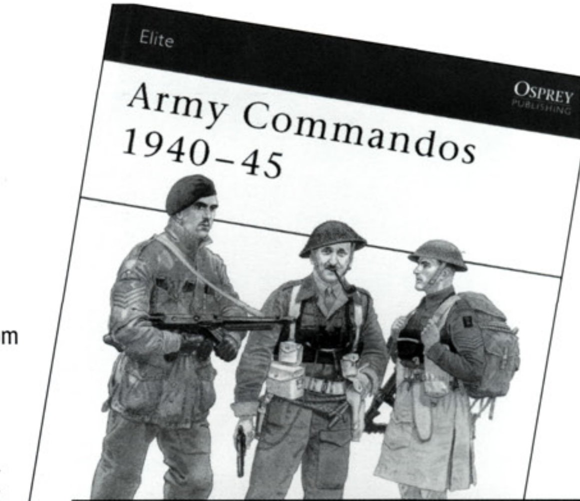
This book is a fine account of all the numerous Commando, Royal Navy and Royal Marine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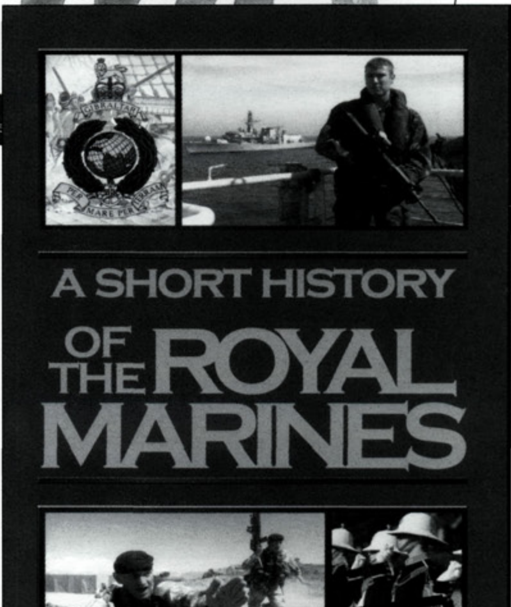
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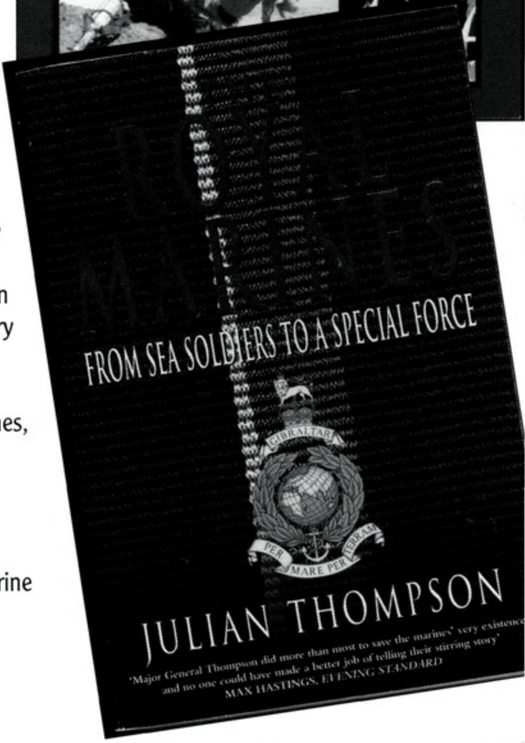
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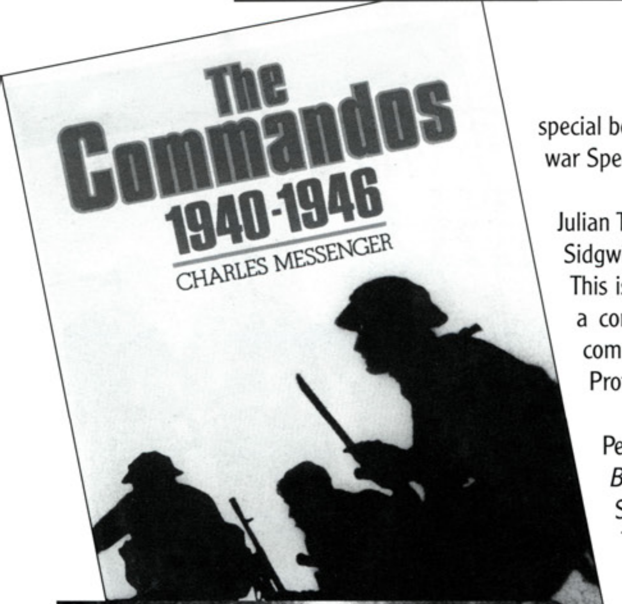
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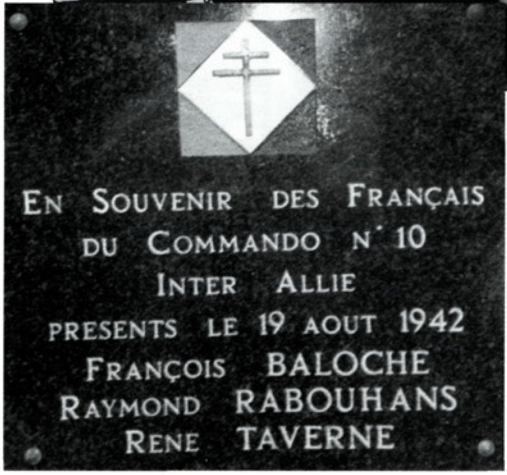
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INTER ALLIE
PRESENTS LE 19 AOUT 1942
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**Below left:** Commando memorial at Spean Bridge. *WFC*

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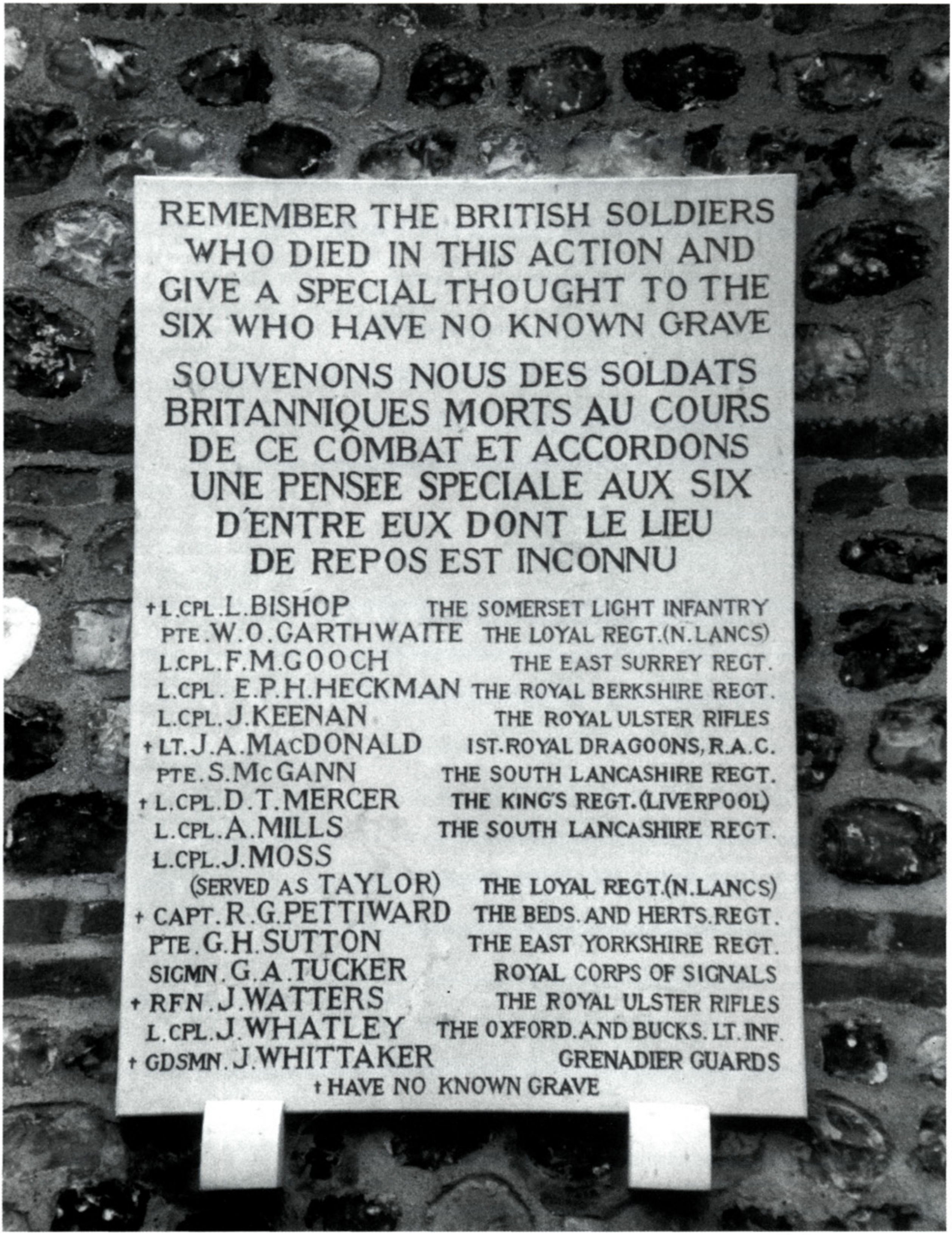

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GIVE A SPECIAL THOUGHT TO THE
SIX WHO HAVE NO KNOWN GRAVE

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# COMMANDOS

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**About the author**

**Simon Dunstan** is a long-established author with over 30 books to his name. His particular field of expertise is the tactical and technical employment of AFVs since World War 2, notably during the Korean, Vietnam and Arab-Israeli Wars. As an accomplished photographer and film maker, he has produced numerous military history television documentaries. He resides in London and is married with one son and two daughters

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